Gutter-Babies

by

DOROTHEA SLADE

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Gutter-Babies

Blanchie threatening (p. 166)

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BY

DOROTHEA SLADE

With Illustrations by
LADY STANLEY

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Contents

I. Guttergarten and the Fall 1

II. A Paradise Lost 10

III. The Philosophy of the Gutter . . . 14

IV. The Pedigree of Johnny 24

V. Walking out with Special Johnny . . 34

VI. Where the Gutter-Babies Play . . 45

VII. Trippers in Guttergarten . . . 52

VIII. The Development of Johnny . . . 59

IX. The Gutter Parson 67

X. How the Gutter-Babies Go . . . 80

XI. The Minding of a Gutter-Baby . . 87

XII. A Grandmother in Guttergarten . . 100

XIII. The Gutter Philanthropy . . . 111

XIV. A Silent Sappho 124

XV. The Gutter-Baby Mystic . . . 133

XVI. The Crown of Thorns 144

XVII. "At Home" in Guttergarten . . . 157

XVIII. The Elder Lizzie 166

Contents

XIX. The Open Door in Guttergarten . 176

XX. The Time to Hop 189

XXI. The Game in Guttergarten . . 196

XXII. The Prisoner of Guttergarten . . 207

XXIII. The Starver 219

XXIV. The Frown of Guttergarten . . . 229

XXV. Thursday 243

XXVI. The Palm Boy 256

XXVII. Among the Deaf and Dumb . . 264

XXVIII. The Christmas Tree 275

XXIX. An Omo-Pathetic Opinion . . . 288

XXX. The Boy in the Wood 297

XXXI. The Jest of Guttergarten . . . 308

XXXII. Sick Gutter-Babies 320

XXXIII. The Twilight of Johnny . . . 334

Illustrations

Blanchie threatening (p. 166) . . . *Frontispiece*

"My beauty a liften' up 'is voice" . . . 2

A youthful philosopher in the flattest pose . 16

"Run! run!" screamed Johnny 84

The Poetess teaching long stories in verse . . 128

"Please 'member the Grotto!" 140

The Strange Woman lurched against the bannisters 164

"We can't agree". 202

Struggling to command her dizzy senses . . 220

A Gutter-baby was taking his first walk . . 282

It was an unusually hard winter 310

A group of stealthy figures sliding away . . 340

Gutter-Babies

CHAPTER I

Guttergarten and the Fall

THERE has never been more than one sin in Guttergarten. The whole experience of the race has come down to the Gutter in the relentless severity of one prohibitive commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out." Upon this elementary principle the Gutter has schooled its young for untold generations, to tire out their extravagant energies and the splendid joy of being in the swinging enthusiasm and wild ecstasy of Gutter-life, under a veil of stolid indifference and patient apathy, and to die at last in the full hope and assurance of self-righteous respectability, "I ain't never got meself into no trouble."

In the particular experience of the individual Gutter-baby, the crash of the historic Fall comes with appalling violence and the

shock of a great physical force, in one unguarded moment, after a protracted period of successful hide-and-seek and cunning evasion.

"Stop where yar!" says Gutter Maternity, as she deposits a raw teething Beginning on the recently scoured doorstep, barricades from it the enticing view of the great world beyond by a chair thrown backwards across the threshold, shakes a warning red finger wildly overhead, "Ef I ketches yer!" and deserts her offspring for the back-yard and the wash-tub.

Left to his own devices, the solitary Beginning passes through a variety of the elementary stages of development.

At first, the only real fact which seems to be apparent in this strange new world of matter is the consciousness of the small self-life of its own personal helplessness and isolation. There is no one to notice the startled intelligence of two blue unseeing eyes as they swim, round and forlorn, in each slowly rising pond of tears, or the lengthening proportions of the upper lip, which trembles presently into a song of frightened sweetness.

That 's my beauty a liften' up 'is voice

The woman in the back-yard has heard it with the alert ear of primitive motherhood, but remains stubbornly unsympathetic to the piteousness of the appeal. "That's my beauty a liften' up 'is voice," she calls to the next-door back-yard.

"Well 'e ain't come to much 'arm while 'e can make that shindy, for sure."

By-and-by the Beginning gradually ceases to cry intelligently, the whimpering sobs continue spasmodically and aimlessly, for already the busy little brain speck is off in another direction. Oblivion has gathered the woman into the unreal ghostland of an elementary memory. The Beginning has forgotten his mother! But somewhere still in the vague unfocussed atmosphere of the small self's environment, that warning red finger wags a nameless threat. And on the other side of the prostrated chair ring the merry music of human voices and the clapping of nailed boots upon the stone pavement, and the battle of hoofs and wheels in that ceaselessly excited world beyond. The whimpering subsides into puzzled contempla-

tion and silence comes; for the dawn of a life-long wonder is slowly breaking over the stolid material horizon of the familiar wooden chair. The day is surely coming when the Beginning, who is now independent of human companionship, and has learnt to forget his mother at intervals, will discover the old-world game of playing at chance with the warning red finger of fear. The crisis arrives when the Beginning knows that he is strong enough in wind and will and has acquired the necessary control over his little body to enter into an encounter with the wooden chair. The conquest of the material enemy is a slow and tiresome process, punctuated by many persevering failures and heroic adventures. Outside in the back-yard the white clothes are bobbing and wagging in long irregular lines before the majesty of the morning sun. Long-limbed garments are swinging in fantastic gestures and making eccentric advances towards a row of babies' pinafores, tossed and tumbled in the tomboy clutches of the spring winds.

"Ain't it a dy for dryin'?" remarks the woman.

Bump! from within, and a shrill wail of anguish summons her hurriedly from the back-yard.

"My! wotever's 'appened now!" And the Beginning is promptly gathered up in two red arms and crushed with loud kisses against a warm and ample bosom. "Was it the naughty chair, then, didums?"

Presently a solemn-eyed Beginning, with a hard lump, smeared with butter, on his puckered forehead, watched the violent readjustment of the chair and slowly realised the force of that "Ef I ketches yer!" as it loomed with a tremendous purpose out of the shadow of the mysteries and became crystallized in the solid world of facts. Might he not one day change places with the chair, and the wrath of the woman be directed against himself? As the Beginning grasped his first lesson in moral discipline, one deep impression was received upon the blank surface of his young mind, "Thou shalt not be found out!" And thus he made his first step in the life of deception.

One day the woman will discover that the

chair has been shifted out of its original position. "'Oo moved this cheer, I wonders!" But by this time the Beginning has cut several teeth, bumped himself into a condition of invulnerable endurance, and learned his lesson intelligently. He is no longer a raw and immature Beginning. Waving a fat fist that has gained much in weight and force since his first introduction to the chair, he succeeds in diverting the attention of the woman in the direction of the cat, who, having picked out a little circle of sunlight for her own use, has settled herself inoffensively within it. Held upwards at an impossible angle, one back leg has become the subject of her meditations, and will probably inspire her presently to attempt ablutionary operations upon it.

Captured unawares, the unsuspecting cat flies into space at the red hands' pleasure. "Yer nasty beast! take that and that, and now 'ook it, will yer!"

Meanwhile the Beginning adds another mental note to his observations. To deserved discipline he adds substitution, and again his little brain is deeply scarred with the old im-

pression, as it were, in letters of fire, "Thou shalt not be found out."

And as yet the Beginning still ripens in the innocent enjoyment of the Gutter-baby's Eden. He has never been naughty! But wait for a little while till the red hands are busy rather longer than usual among the soapsuds in the back-yard, until the chair has at last yielded to superior force, till mind has completely subdued matter, and the little Beginning is lord at last of his whole correspondence. Wait for a little till the kitchen is empty, and the red hands are lifted appealingly in piteous dismay. The wooden enemy is kicked aside, and the cat sleeps securely on the tiled roof of the little tool-house next door, but the erring footsteps of the Beginning are printed clearly on the white doorstep. And soon the fate of the Beginning is sealed for ever.

"Mrs. Williams, do you know your baby's in the road?"

It is over at last. In the family bed all alone the Beginning comes to himself. He collects his convulsed and stricken intelligence to

ponder deeply over his own shaken and battered little body, and the whole tremendous problem of fallen humanity, and the mission of evil in a Gutter-baby world. He hears the cheerful clatter of man's boots on the pavement below, and the familiar sound of Daddy's voice calling to him. But he must not go. For everything has happened since this morning, and nothing will ever be the same again. This is the Fall, and the Beginning has been found out.

If everyone knew and remembered this episode in the early history of a Gutter-baby, most probably the curious little enigma of his subsequent career would be far more intelligible to those who make such valiant efforts and long so greedily to read its secret. It is difficult to keep in correspondence with his violent changes of pose and character, and next to impossible to trace through them the slender and elusive chain of continuity which so marvellously preserves his little personality unique and individual, but he never forgets his first impression of morality, or seriously changes his mind about it. Sin is always

represented by a "copper" and handcuffs, and in every real storm in Guttergarten the worst sinner is the person who interferes or blows the police whistle, and he is always bitterly blamed for the criminal's misfortune. In Guttergarten the only virtuous woman is she who tells her business to nobody. No wonder, therefore, that the Gutter-baby who tries to be good keeps himself to himself.

CHAPTER II

A Paradise Lost

HUNT STREET was comparatively quiet, for the London County Council is as greedy for our boys and girls as the seductive Pied Piper of Hamelin. There was nobody to take the "Byby" out walking in the Gutter, and the highway, the playground of the elders, was deserted. One or two red-faced women shouted at each other from their respective doorways. A coster-boy had upset a barrel of apples from his truck and swore a little as he rescued them one by one from muddy graves, wiping them carefully with his kerchief, the badge of his office, and as sacred to the profession as the barrister's wig, or the physician's thermometer. Suddenly from No. 6, top front, came the cry of a little child. The small room was full of women, beery and emotional, with moist, sympathetic eyes. On the bed a three-days-old infant was dying with blue lips and convulsed limbs.

Someone said, "Go for the Priest!" And the rest of us kept watch silently. I noticed a faint purple mark on the left temple of the tiny upturned face. The fire had been starved out, and the useless steam kettle pointed out a long attenuated finger of derision. A piece of stout paper with a little rent in it was pinned across the broken window. In the corner was a odd-shaped bundle wrapped in a plaid shawl. Then the Priest came.

"Name this child."

At this point the bundle in the corner under the plaid came to life.

"Sit quiet, Johnny William!" said a reproving voice from one of the women.

"John William!" repeated the Priest gravely.

Then something happened in the little room, and we knew that the newly enlisted soldier had received his orders for foreign service.

The mother began to cry hysterically and the women shuffled clumsily away.

"Yer done 'im wrong, Father!" said one rough mourner as she passed; "that's the little bloke's nime!"

From its corner the plaid bundle was observant. It had a very big head with queer twisted features and shrewd round eyes, legs too, but they were weakly things, and not much to be trusted, and It did not often stand upright. It did not now, but came out of Its covered retreat in a sitting posture, with odd uncertain movements, steered by a pair of energetic heels. There was nothing either lovely or childish in the elfin creature, — yet something must be said.

For a moment the Priest and the lay bundle looked at each other, then It understood.

"Wot did yer do it fer, Guvner? It's this man's nime!"

"Child!" said the Priest gently, "the little one is dead!" To him it seemed the way out of the difficulty.

Johnny William peered up through the slit in the paper blind, at the pitiless grey sky, and smothered a storm of passion in the friendly plaid.

"Then 'e's doned me, the bloomin' tike!" he said huskily.

A Paradise Lost

We were all a little shocked. For already the sanctity of death had shrouded the still small body, and we were too old to know that to a baby with crooked legs the passing of a three-days'-wonder is nothing at all compared with a Paradise lost!

The plaid bundle, surprising everybody and itself most, grew up one day, straight and strong, if a little eccentric, and became my Johnny.

But from some deep subconscious pocket of the memory I still believe that little incident embitters his outlook on life, and suggests the phantasy that every living thing that looks at him is his natural enemy, until it has proved itself a friend.

CHAPTER III

The Philosophy of the Gutter

I SUPPOSE it is because Nature dazzles us with such an exuberance of wealth overhead that there is so little time to look for her windfalls. Some day perhaps people will grow tired of star-gazing and will turn their eyes to the Gutter; then they will find the Gutter-babies, and many wonderful things.

A little way out on the map of life, every pilgrim from his own mountain of myrrh must make his venture; some of us have a natural tendency to the Gutter. It is much better than going to the wall. No psychologist could possibly find a more convenient observatory, for nowhere else is human correspondence so abruptly gracious and intimate. Here the dirtiest and most diminutive of Gutter atoms crawl safely through the elementary stages of infancy into precocious adolescence, far from the battle of hoofs and

wheels and the congested struggle of the highway. For the Gutter is the nursery of the poor.

Here, too, are foreigners among the natives, stars who have dropped out of an unknown and uncharted meridian, with queer and often pathetic biographies of their own, which they will tell, but not at all times or to all enquirers.

Once I met a youthful philosopher in the flattest pose possible to rotund humanity, with pink heels kicking at vacuity and a cunning nose levelled to the grating of a drain.

It was my Johnny.

"Do you like smelling drains, Johnny?"

He lifted a somewhat apoplectic countenance to explain.

"It ain't the bloomin' drain what matters, it's what comes out of its bloody inside! Once my Rosie, her finded a fadger here." Johnny smiled a great, blissful, expectant smile. "I'm lookin' for a dear little shiner!" he said.

"We will play that game together, Johnny."

So we did, he and I, and never got tired of it.

I was walking with a very small person; she was dressed in a tumbled cotton frock and a sunbonnet with one string. Otherwise she was quite curiously unlike the local lady. As we proceeded, the small person became confidential. Her name was Blanchie, and Johnny claimed her as a relative because she was brought up by his aunt who took in Gutter-babies to mind, and she called Johnny's twin cousins, Alf and Earn, her brothers. But many streets and many gutters divided them from Special Johnny, and if it had not been for the call of the blood it is doubtful if the authorities would even have permitted them to play together.

For the Twins' Dad was a gentleman all the week, and the little boys had their hair curled and wore velveteen on Sundays. The steps into society are frequently quite as abrupt in the Gutter-world, but Blanchie was the secret of this family success.

She was a Gutter-baby Wonder.

All day long she said her lessons and sucked sweets surreptitiously in the big school of the Gutter-babies, ate a scrappy fish dinner on

A youthful philosopher in the flattest pose

her way out to play, just like the normal Gutter-baby, and romped and fought and wept through Gutter-life, the merriest and most mischievous of the little wild people, the spoilt darling of our set.

This was the Blanchie that we knew best, a wistful, precocious, sharp-witted creature, with whom always and everywhere flowed the warm and glowing atmosphere of the guardian Spirit, called out of his Art Heaven to mind this wayward nursling of Genius through her extraordinary and very earthly career.

But when her playmates were cuddled together dreaming, with their restless limbs and chattering tongues as still as they ever are (for every real Gutter-baby tosses and moans in his sleep), while Johnny lay on his back snoring, and the Twins slept sweetly in pink flannelette, with their golden hair securely fastened up in pins, — all night long before two "Houses" a very absurdly rosy and professionally smiling Blanchie in a short skirt tripped about on the points of satin slippers, singing loudly through her nose, as

she held sway over a troupe of overgrown and clumsy fairies in an obscurely suburban music-hall. The presence of the Guardian, paling and sick at this sordid insult to his art, yet more brilliant than the blinding lime-light, wrapped itself about her innocence, so that the cold world, which shuts its heart against Gutter-babies, found a tender thought for the Art-nursling, and someone would remember his own spoilt darling asleep on a soft pillow, and someone else would offer to see her safely across the road to the station. A tiny fist it was that he held, gripping fast a bulky treasure tucked away inside a cotton glove — the three pennies for her return fare to Shepherd's Bush.

But the small person was talking to me.

"I shan't do no acting when I'm big, you know, there won't be time."

I wondered why, and was presently informed with due solemnity.

"I'm a scholar; I'm sharp at my lessons; they think they learned me to read at schule, but they never. I knew my letters off the 'buses before I could walk."

I dropped the foolish air of patronage which one sometimes assumes for the benefit of Gutter-babies who require cultivating, and became respectful.

"Then I suppose you intend to be a teacher?"

"No, I'll have a schule; I'll be guveness!"

Presently she asked cheerfully, "What did you take up with me for?"

I told her as well as I could, and then made an attempt to reply to a volley of questions.

"It's good to ask 'em, ain't it?"

I assented agreeably, supposing it to be at least the best way to learn the answer, anyway.

"Some don't seem to think so, but I reckons you can find out a lot this way, if you don't ask silly ones and put people off you."

One great fear haunts and threatens the "scholar's" brilliant future. It is that the terrible medical certificate may stop her "schulin'." It does happen sometimes to "awful sharp kids." Some day I suppose the Art-nursling will arrive at independence and will go away with her books, shaking off the

foster family (who will then cease to appear in velveteen on Sundays) and leaving behind her a little pair of worn-out dancing-shoes with blunted toes.

Earn was not really a disagreeable little boy, in spite of his unfortunate weakness for curls and velveteen. He had a magnificent gift of lying, and a clinging affection for the environment of Johnny. At times it seemed as if he might be quite one of us some day. His mother was very proud of having reared him from seven months, and to this interesting fact in his early history she attributed all his many feelings and eccentricities. After administering a vigorous chastisement she would console herself with the reflection, "There, what can you expect of a seven-months!"

She sent him to me the other day, seriously alarmed at his powers of mendacity, which were indeed remarkable, even for a Gutter-baby.

"The lyin' little 'ound," she introduced him. "I 'm sure me and his Dad, no one can't say as 'ow we don't keep our children respect-

able, and I doos 'is 'air up every night, I do, and where 'e learns it I can't think. It all comes of takin' other people's to mind. They ain't like yer own. But there," she finished, with a shrewd wink at me over the golden head of the weeping Earn, "what can you expect!"

We heard her patiently, but when she had gone we sat far into the tea-hour together, his soft confiding voice charming away the twilight. Both of us quite forgot why he had come, forgot that he was a mean little snob who told lies, a Gutter-weakling with tangled curls and — the Gutter-babies' chief abhorrence — spotless linen! These narrow firelit walls, the hard edges of our little world, surrendered to a fairy kingdom of limitless dimensions. Spellbound we followed the thread of his expert imagination through a narrative, if slightly incoherent and vaguely suggestive, yet sufficiently graceful not to shame the great Grimms themselves.

Then, a sudden hesitation, with no hope of continuation in our next, and no persuasion could drag from the orator anything but the

most trivial conversation. It was the only glimpse I had into that vivid and fertile mental atmosphere. For the sickly, freakish energy of the "seven-months" was easily exhausted and his time with us was brief. But a few days after our interview he was observed playing with some other children at a school-treat on the shore at Bognor. A basket with the usual Gutter-baby treasures — broken crockery, presents for loved ones at home, and the diminishing store of sticky pennies — slipped into the waves splashing stormily at high tide in a strong breeze.

The small group stared dismally at the tragedy, but the little despised boy in his absurd tunic, with his damp curls tortured by the wind, singing to a trail of seaweed all by himself in his dreamy and vacant way, suddenly became the hero of the occasion, and waded out waist deep among the breakers to recover the precious articles.

His dripping and triumphant return, as he handed the wreckage to its weeping owner, was greeted by an indignant welcome from

the presiding Sister, in whose judgment the drenched and forlorn condition of his little person was the most serious dilemma.

It was not worth the risk of being washed out to sea, or the chance of rheumatic fever, or the spoiling of his velveteens.

If his Mother had been there she would certainly have added — "There, what can you expect of a seven-months!"

But we knew better.

"I was playin' it was a baby," whispered Earn; "I 'eard it cry."

And what is to come of it all? Will the London County Council be equal to the educational problem? Or must Philosopher, Scholar, Romanticist, smother in the Gutter that gave them birth?

CHAPTER IV

The Pedigree of Johnny

BUT it is time for us to consider what freak of fortune stranded my Johnny in the Gutter with the perpetual problem whence and whither.

Let me introduce you to Johnny's parents.

"When are yer cumin' to make a 'ome for our Johnny?"

The Boy 'Enery put his shy question leaning against the dusty creeper that crawled over Hearn's cottage, with his thin profile turned towards the dear familiar picture of the little Mother, framed in the evening glow. The wind teased her heavily braided hair above the tanned forehead. The orange-patterned shawl was gathered into a bundle in her arms, and from its daring folds the child with his own tired smile, pathetic in its utter absence of gaiety, looked out at him. Behind the old caravan in the Gipsies' Yard, the sun went slowly down. Johnny's home

had long been a forbidden subject, but to-night something in the Boy's weary voice made the little Mother's answer tender.

"When I be free," she said, and looked away into the dream of the golden sunset. Then she set down the child, who clung to her skirts with the waywardness of three petted years.

"Johnny go to Dad!" she urged.

The Boy held out his arms.

"Yus, come to Dad and 'ave a nice ride!"

He hoisted the child on to his stooping shoulders where the little creature sat crowing in nervous joy.

"Waal, I'll be passin' in the mornin'. Tooraloo!"

"Tooraloo!" echoed the little Mother, and slipped into the shadows behind the door where the ancient scion of the House of Hearn sat huddled up before the fire, drinking away the twilight of his years in querulous impotence. His wrinkled and unpleasing physiognomy, tanned and seamed as an old leather boot, leered out at her from the gloom, with eyes that glowed like two living coals in a jealous flame.

"Were that the Boy 'Enery?" he asked.

"Yus, it were."

"Oh, mebbe 'e thinks it's long to wait! an mebbe 'e's witin' for the devil to die."

He put down his mug, spat viciously into the glowing embers and lay back in a drunken slumber. For a long time the little Mother sat on among the shadows with her chin cradled in one slender brown hand, until the lights sprang up one by one in the night outside and the wind blew in sharply. Then she bolted the door and carried a spluttering candle to the foot of the ladder which led to her own little attic in the leaky roof. There she paused, swaying in the sudden grip of a mighty temptation.

"What if I did leave 'im! Gawd in 'Eaven, what if I did?"

The Boy had been hers ever since the day when old Hearn's tales of adventure before the settlement in the Gipsies' Yard first broke into the monotony of his cheerless school days. She had been his Queen in all that stolen playtime, when they sat together on the old caravan and took strange journeys,

guided by her tireless imagination, into a wonderland of their own, with the magic password, "Let's pretend."

But the gipsy folk have queer ways and customs of their own, and Hearn's daughter would have brought down all the curses of her race if she had left her father's roof with a stranger. The Boy had long realized the hopelessness of waging war against a superstition which he had almost learnt to respect, and accepted the position with more or less resignation. Every night he stopped at Hearn's cottage and carried Johnny away to a little damp underground room, which he rented from his widowed mother, with uncertain meals thrown in, for half his weekly wages earned working overtime at the printing factory; and every morning he brought the child back and left him for the day at Hearn's cottage. On Sundays and holidays they walked out together, taking it in turns to carry Johnny, who was backward with his legs, and the smell of the green things in the Park revived the spring in their worn-out young hearts. And still old Hearn put off

the day when he should crawl feebly out to the steps of the old caravan and lie down there with his fathers under the wide quiet sky. Still the pathos of this odd romance worried the neighbours, and still Johnny was a bird of passage.

But when Hearn's daughter first became the little Mother, a great conflict of emotions began in her breast, between the newly-awakened fierce excitement of maternity and the long chain of hereditary instincts which bound her in the coils of convention. To-night as she stood with the candle-light leaping among the shadows on the wall behind her, the struggle had reached a crisis.

The Boy ambled sideways out of the Gipsies' Yard, shying nervously at his own shadow and nearly unseating his small rider, who shouted with gleeful panic, and met three pals outside the "Blue Star."

"Weer tu?" they greeted his eccentric advance.

"'ome!" said the Boy. He was not a wordy man, and had lost wind.

"Come and 'ave a pot of six fust, then!" They pressed a cheery invitation.

The Boy hesitated; it was not much like his usual habits, he was known as one that "kep 'isself to 'isself." But to-night the atmosphere was unusual, as though some volcanic disturbance had raised the crust of hell itself.

He lifted down the child, already wearying of his high seat, and fidgetting fretfully.

"Run 'ome to Mumma, Johnny!" he said, and watched the little creature wriggle down its puckered garments and lurch off obediently on ricketty legs. Round the corner at that moment came just such a crowd as the Gutter-baby loves. There was a policeman, and a young woman, barearmed and excited, and a forlornly empty perambulator, and all round and in front and in the rear a voluble mass of humanity. The young woman, poor thing, was hoping for a little home of her own soon, and had bought the vehicle wonderfully cheap from the man who stole it, and the baby was still only a lovely dream. But all the elements of a crime were there, so oddly attractive to

the young in every walk of life. On swept the procession, and with it poor bewildered Johnny, caught in its web. Up one street and down another,— it was not far to the police station, — but Johnny had never been out before alone and was soon hopelessly lost. Presently the policeman found him crumpled up in the gutter, crying like a homeless kitten.

"Why, bless me if this ain't 'Earn's brat!" he said; and picking him up transported him to the Gipsies' Yard.

Two hours later, the Boy, with a bad headache and a bad temper, lurched down the area steps with an ugly curse and found the little Mother in his room. Her face was very pale in the candlelight; she held out her arms with a quiet smile, and a shy tremor shook her voice.

"I've come to yer at last, 'Enery!" Then, with her natural alertness of perception, she cried out with a bitter sense of wrong as into the Boy's vacant stare there crept slowly the dawn of a steely horror. "It were fer our Johnny's sake an' 'e 's gone!"

Down went the little Mother's proud head to hide her shame in an agony of control. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away three long hours, while the little Mother sat silently shivering under her curse, and the Boy's love for her seemed to grow cold in a nightmare of superstition. Morning came and he went out fasting — but returned soon after, sick and giddy, with his arm slung in a crimson bandage; — there had been an accident at the factory and he had smashed his hand. The Gipsy's curse was developing. It was almost a relief to find the room empty as it reeled before his dizzy gaze. But he could not rest, and very soon the old resistless chain of habit led his footsteps to the Gipsy Settlement.

In the sunlit morning, the old caravan stood silhouetted against a blue background, and between the huge wheels that had made their last journey peeped the happy smile of a child at play, careless of the great tragedy of life wearing itself out so near. On the steps crouched the little Mother, sweetly fragile after the night of terror, and pillowed on her

bosom was a grey face turned upward to the wide sky where a bird was singing somewhere in the clouds. The girl bent her ear to catch the last scarcely articulate words —

"Thought 'er 'd gone an' left me and I cursed she — it must 'a' bin fancy!"

There was a long shiver, and as Hearn's daughter shut out the world from that idiot stare and tied a yellow handkerchief round the fallen jaw, she told her lie to the dead.

Not many days later, as the Boy wheeled out of the Gipsies' Yard a truck piled high with somebody's little home, on the top of which sat a dark-eyed baby with a crêpe bow under his chin, while the little Mother followed behind with her arms full, — he nearly bowled over one of his mates.

"Hullo," said the latter; "'eard the news? The guvner's pide yer 'alf-time an's keepin' yer plice!"

Even an employer knows when it is cautious to appear generous. But this pair were too happy to be hypercritical. For them the sweat of many brows and the groan of life's

machinery were less real than the Eden of myth which had flung wide its gates and filled the world. And underneath the green promise of this gentle springtide the Gipsy's curse slept in six foot of Hanwell loam.

CHAPTER V

Walking Out with Special Johnny

IT was towards the close of his seventh winter that Johnny and I began to walk out. Amid the changing moods of the month of Mary the frost-nipped earth was cheered suddenly by a joyous burst of sunshine. Away in the country the song-birds were practising, and the tender spring blossoms lifting up full hearts. Here, outside my window, a single hawthorn tree, budding cautiously, tempted a Gutter-boy to revert to the arboreal habits of some ape-like progenitor; and who shall say what sleeping memories of a prehistoric springtide inspired his first love-song?

"Come out, come out, the sun is shining bright,
So git yer 'at an' jacket on,
Tell yer mother yer won't be long,
An' come an' kiss yer Johnny roun' the corner."

A strip of narrow sunlit street on a holiday afternoon with one vivid spot of colour, green

and orange, as a small bantam cock picks its way carefully from one side to the other. Two rows of lodging-houses grim and high, a baby or two, sprawling helpless in innocent finery, a few loiterers, and suddenly a barrel organ jerking out a wheezy tune. In a second the lazy scene is a whirlwind of mad energy, a tangle of bright bows and bobbing feathers. Heavy women clumsily draped in draggled skirts set to shirt-sleeved, hobnail-booted partners with an amazing dignity of poise and vivacity of twinkling feet. Tiny bare-headed and breathless dancers lend to the revelry a poetry of movement in a thousand graceful antics and dainty frolics, pointing here and there, and laying about them not a few coquettish cuffs as a string of rough lads bear down upon them furiously, breaking their lines. The excitement increases, faster fly the giddy figures, and shriller peal the hysterical giggles and snatches of popular melodies. A girl has cut down a clothes-line in somebody's back-yard, and throws it with shrieking triumph to her mates, clinging to her skirts and skipping high with squeals of

panic as the huge rope whistles through the air.

Suddenly the doors of a public house swing open violently, and two men locked together hurl themselves upon the careless scene. The performers scatter screaming, and then close up in a gaping, struggling crowd. Someone makes a feeble attempt to come between the brawlers. Hands off! It is a shame to spoil sport. One man is down; there is a sickening thud and a heavy silence. He must be held up with dizzy head and bleeding face and thrown back at his opponent. But there is a piercing cry of "Father — it's my father," as one of the happy little dancers of a minute before springs into the heart of the struggle, and flies at the throat of the conqueror like a wild cat. The man shakes her off and flings her back into the arms of the eager crowd who hold her with difficulty. Two women are grappling with the men now. This way and that way the crowd heaves, — but what is the matter? The organ-grinder has long ago made his escape — this is not the kind of scene it is prudent for him to figure in; there

are more rules of the road than the wary motorist wots of. Already a busy knot of friends are assisting the combatants, one of them strangely limp and unresisting, into the dark refuge of opposite doorways, and between them winds a ribbon of dusty pavement, where a blue-clad, helmetted figure stands solemn and impassive, and a little bantam cock is cunningly considering if it is possible to make the return journey with safety.

Into the foreground of this empty picture Johnny dropped suddenly from the heart of the may-tree, his countenance ruddy as the spray of blushing blossom that fell with him.

"Were n't it jest grand!" he said; and, adding regretfully, "It ain't no use witin' 'ere; weer shall us go?" he tucked a grimy companionable hand in mine and led me out.

The Spirit of the Exodus was in the air. Even Gutterland cannot altogether escape the *Zeitgeist*, which at intervals sweeps away the faithful and leaves London in the hands of the tourist and stranger. Here the Exodus begins with a certain class of refined ladies

devoted to the single life whom we call "chars."

"Hi 've got er nice job," they speak one to another, in filing solemnly away to the deserted homes of aristocracy, and followed generally, in case it is lonesome at night, by somebody else's meek little girl of exceeding tender years, who will protect them from ghostly terrors, and "fetch hin hall the 'errings!"

"Yus, not 'arf I 'avn't, — a 'ouse in Nolling Park for six blooming weeks han hall foun'!"

On the other side of the curtain which the wind is blowing across that upper window on your left, there is another kind of Exodus going on. I stood there just now, within earshot of the voices of the holiday keepers and the shriek of the train that is bearing them on their careless way, and drew my handkerchief across a woman's dying face, to keep away the flies from the poor mouth that will never close again. That body was sweating at the laundry yesterday, working barearmed in the wash-house, but already

the mind has gone out into the unknowable, and soon, missing its companion, will come back to fetch away the soul.

Towards a scuffling knot of humanity at the electric tram terminus Johnny hurried me eagerly.

"Don't it jes' give yer the gut-ache?" he said, straining every nerve. "But cheer up, we're most nearly there!"

As we stood wedged in the jostling, perspiring, and impertinently facetious crowd, he betrayed a little anxiety.

"Don't cher lose me, — 'old my belly-band."

I obeyed his instructions, and at the same time a yellow apparition in the distance inspired us all to renewed struggles.

A fat shopwalker, with a large pink buttonhole, waved Johnny gracefully aside to make way for a pale-faced girl, with a black feather draggling over her shoulder.

Johnny was furious at the indignity.

"Garn, 'oo are yer 'er shovin' of? Give yer er start an' git there first, see if I doesn't, yer bloomin' cad!"

A roar of laughter from the fat man drowned my piteous entreaties, as Johnny wrenched himself free of my careful grasp, swung himself on to the rail, and boarded the tram in an absolutely miraculous way, like the cat in a Christmas pantomime. For a moment I saw his beaming triumph over the polished bar on top, till a buzzing sea of people hid it from me. Then the tram started and Johnny was out in the world alone. For a time I pursued, as some dumb thing robbed of its young, while the conductor with a tolerant smile patiently rebuked my persistency.

"I tell yer, there ain't no room!"

Every second the distance between Johnny and me grew more alarming, until at last the car became a tiny orange, bounding away in the dusty horizon. Then I went to the nearest police station, harassed and incoherent. A very big, very gentle official listened with some patience to my painful recital, operating on the telephone and questioning me from time to time.

"Was the article of much value?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, it could never be re-

placed," I assured him; "in fact, it was quite unique!"

This information was bawled from suburb to suburb, and the fame of Special Johnny became more than merely local.

The next question was a teaser.

"Was it coloured?" My hesitation was obvious.

"The colour?" persisted the polite official.

"It was European," I began feebly, and knew at once that I had committed myself, — for who knows the true origin of the dusky-eyed "Rum Roy"?

For some minutes this duologue continued. At last my interlocutor was seized with a really brilliant idea. He became quite intelligent over it.

"Are you speaking of a boy, madam?" he suggested suddenly, and with perfect composure the next message sped through the telephone: —

"The lady has lost a boy, *not* a boa!"

Then he turned to reassure me. Every tram between us and Hanwell should be thoroughly searched and if the young person

were discovered he would be detained at the local police station, and communication sent to me; but he finished up with a little fatherly advice, which did much to soothe my agitation. If he were me (no doubt congratulating himself that it was not so with him), he would return home at once in case Johnny had by some strange chance got there first. I had pictured to myself many final scenes of tragedy, varying in pathos and agony, but that I had not thought of.

Once more Hope whispered faintly to my despairing heart as I sat spent and worn in the car that bumped me along my anxious way. As I reached my destination the lights of home jumped up one by one in the twilight, and the holiday-makers were gathering in friendly loquacious groups round the hospitable doors of the publican. I made straight for Johnny's mother. She was presiding at some sort of a banquet with the blessings that every year added to her round about her table. It was a less formidable interview than might have been expected.

"Give yer the slip! Did 'e now? The saucy

little dev! But 'e'll never lose 'isself — no sich luck!"

She was busy with at least four rosebud mouths expectant, — besides the babe at her breast, — and no doubt dismissed the matter from her mind as I left pondering over the dispositions of maternity. The wisdom of the generating ages would never, I suppose, be deceived into thinking that my Johnny did not belong to somebody else, but surely the test has altered since the day of Solomon.

But the big official with his kindly advice, and the poor woman embarrassed by the liberality of Nature's dower, were both quite right. As I approached, behold an elongated branch of the may-tree, with Johnny at the remote end of it sweeping the gutter with a delightful swinging motion.

"Yer losed me!" said John, when, the first gush of joy over, the time for explanation had come. And that was all I could ever get out of him about that wild ride into a new world, which must have seemed to his Gutter-bound vision as the spaceless Universe itself, though the occasion is often referred to with

injured pathos, — "Yer losed me onct," — and always somehow with beneficial results to himself. But it was a necessary incident in the long sweet romance of our companionship. Loss and recognition are indispensable to the sense of possession. Everything has to be found once, even one's own identity. Johnny is my Johnny now, because there is the chance of losing him.

CHAPTER VI

Where the Gutter-Babies Play

WHEN the slum naturalist grows confused and loses his bearings in the Gutter, he does not, as some people imagine, wander westwards to think out his problem in an armchair, but sits down just where he is, to think. Then he discovers something he might have known all the while, if only he had not been too busy to be attentive, — that the Gutter itself has a voice to answer questions. At these times Guttergarten, the play kingdom of slum childhood, is indispensable, and adequately provides for the medical prescription of rest and change. Buried in the heart of a world of smoky factories, laundries, and disfiguring architecture, there lies photographed upon my mind the picture of an acre or so of asphalt yard, — the "Rec," as I remember it one grey afternoon. The shadows mocked my loneliness in trembling sport about the gaunt giant-strides and idle

swings, dancing fantastically in the silent circle, where on summer nights the shabby band bangs out a mirthless music and all the Gutter-world turns out to hear. The spot remains a dear and sacred memory, for there are a thousand traces of the merry little wild people whom I love. Here is the muddy print of a tiny naked foot with its hobnailed companion beside it. It is the trail of war, for yonder lies the twin boot, where it was hurled at the enemy when its owner, unable to find any other missile, used it as a last resource — as I have seen many a Gutter-baby do — and was then unable to recover it. When it is dark he will come back, creeping cautiously, and leering warily round to see if it is still there. This was the point, a little to the left, where the combatants closed in a struggle, for clinging to the railing is the jagged remnant of a shirt. Before us is the lamp-post where a merry slum sprite has swung, seated in the loop of a skipping-rope, until the partner whose office it is to guard against a catastrophe gets careless, and the victim is bruised cruelly again. How many times I have watched this

daring game, and it always ends the same way.

"Yer goes on," Johnny once explained to me, "till yer bashes in yer 'ead, or tweaks yer dicky!"

But now we have turned into the narrow alley that will bring us to the outer gate, beyond which the struggle of life, of which Guttergarten is only a rehearsal, is being played out in grim reality.

Here Gutter-love was plighted and had its trysting place last springtide. It was as we wandered into the sunshine together, when the sparrows were chirping cheekily from their queer nests in chimney and drain-pipe, when the coster's barrows formed a green sliding forest of feathery ferns, when the women's heads were crowned with gardens of gay blossoms, and the city wheels moved round to the music of the many-voiced cry of "Vilots, sweet vilots!" that Johnny suggested with an apologetic and embarrassed blush, "M' oi bring along a lydy?" With a mighty effort a quick pang of jealousy was strangled and assent given. Perhaps the "lydy" her-

self unconsciously assisted the decision. She was small and starved and skeery, with pink-edged squinting eyes and faded stringy hair. She never, to my knowledge, addressed any remark to Johnny, but accepted him quite naturally as her "bloke." Johnny managed the entire courtship himself, cultivating with a curious imaginative skill this Gutter-Eden of his own creation. One incident drawn from many others will show how he did it.

"Naow, do be mitey an' jes ply engings wi' me fer onct, — wot, yer won't? Git yer oye in er sling, then! Yer do wot oi tells yer! Oise yer bloke. Stand ther naow! — wot, yer won't? not 'arf! Onct oi sez it, oi means it; none of yer swank! Naow, yer 's a enging, an' oi 's er enging. Wen oi whistles, yer whistles — git on wi' it, thin, can't yer? Wen oi runs, yer runs." They both did — and met in an awful collision, letting off steam together in a roar of pain and rage.

"Garn," said Johnny, as soon as he could speak articulately, "yer aren't 'arf fast!"

It was the end of the romance. Later I observed Johnny spending the halfpence he

had saved towards a little home with lavish unconcern.

"Garn," he said to me, "'er ain't no clars; oise *yer* little Johnny, ain't oi? Won't never leave yer agin!"

Already we are in the street, but not beyond the sway of Guttergarten. The "Rec" is its fortress and stronghold, but its territories know no such narrow limit, for it is one of the tender leniencies of borough discipline that the streets of even an earthly city shall be full of boys and girls at play. Let us stand here a moment with noses flattened against the window of the typical bazaar where Johnny and Company satisfy, with a marvellous expenditure of ill-gotten wealth, an extraordinary desire for something sticky and nauseous. Lengthy strips of elastic licorice "garters" drape themselves into enticing clusters, the halfpenny "mixture" offers a kaleidoscope of varied hues, clinging to treacle apples from which the core has been extracted to admit a stream of congealed syrup; we recognize the stripe of the familiar bulls-eye. Here amongst the latest novelties may

be purchased the Nightingale, a quaint musical lozenge, which in process of suction utters a weird note and disappears in song like a dying swan. My night school once persuaded me to adopt this instrument in preference to a bell, but owing to the stringent and objectionable flavour of a certain bladder-like substance, which is the soul of the music, we were forced to abandon the idea.

Yonder end of rope, that swings a frayed and dejected fragment from the rail above the area of a grey and dingy lodging-house, has a pathetic story for us to read before we turn away from the last merry laugh of Guttergarten to the toil and traffic of the city day. It was told to me once in a fierce burst of grief by a wild-eyed, broken-hearted man, who lives at the bottom of these steps.

"It wur moi little Rosie wot set it up, moi little gal wot set it up ther, an wus a-swingin' over the airy so innercent loike, wen over it gives, and down fell she on 'er 'ead. 'Er went to 'orspital, but 'er never git no better, an' all 'er croi wus, 'Dad, don't yer tike that ther rope down, it be sich er foine piece!'"

So it swings there yet, and has weathered all the winter storms, a silent tribute to the god of sport, who, though he prowls from field to riverside, climbing even the Alpine glacier to claim his own, seems to love best to pounce on the little sparrows in the city Gutter; and I wonder sometimes, when wise people are talking about the waste of child life, that they do not more often remark the queer fact that in strange defiance of natural laws, the slums and alleys are rearing many a sickly old man child who has never learnt to play, while in Guttergarten day by day strong little bodies lie down to a long rest after their last most daring enterprise.

CHAPTER VII

Trippers in Guttergarten

A VISITOR in Guttergarten always brings a dual disappointment. You have one twin (the bigger) and your friend has the other. I know of only one exception, in the long and varied experience of at least one slum courier, and it happened in this way.

I had just gone through the dreariest of Gutter pilgrimages with a "lydy" relative, had wearied her unutterably, and quenched every spark of that queer inquisitive sympathy with which one half of the human family likes to regard the unexplored mysteries of the other. Never had my beloved Gutter appeared so little attractive; never had the monotony of the tall dull lines of lodgings been so oppressive, or the gaunt famine-stricken groups of the unemployed seemed so unemployable! The Gutter-babies were packed in bored unsmiling rows in their various ed-

ucational centres, and as we passed, their voices, shrilly raised in the peculiar chant in which they recite their lessons, sounded strained and unnatural. A few truants scattered away at our approach in round-eyed wonder to gaze, finger in mouth, at the strange "lydy." We had been to the church and found it wrapped in a solemn shroud of gloom; we had wandered stolidly through densely populated alleys, as unresponsive and lonely as only the great city knows how to be; and now we had drawn my parlour curtains over the slum scenery and settled down to tea and muffins within the cheery shelter of four firelit walls, both of us trying hard not to recognise failure in the expedition. From without came an unearthly cry, something between an Indian battle-yell and the despairing howl of a lonely terrier. It was not unfamiliar to one of us, who knew that it was a signal, which might mean trouble if treated with contempt. Again it came, louder and more emphatic; I dared not delay longer.

"Excuse me," I said, "it is a friend." And raised my voice to echo back the call.

A heavy battering on the door which had hastened my response ceased, and through the sudden silence came a human voice.

"Ef yer don't let 'im in 'e'll kick yer door down! 'E'll swear awful, 'e will! 'E'll bang big stones at yer glass, 'e will!"

What was to be done? It was my Johnny in his most imperative mood.

Then one of the best ideas I have ever had came to me.

"It is one of the natives," I said; and added carelessly, "I suppose you wouldn't care to see him?"

Happily the visitor did care, so Johnny came to the rescue.

Small and slender, but supple-limbed, with the genius of a long line of gipsy ancestry shining, for those who knew where to look for it, in the wonderful brown heavily-fringed eyes above a full curve of ruddy cheeks — no word picture could do justice to my Johnny. Two enormous ears suggest the uneasy idea that they are an effort at compensation on the part of nature for that arrest of intellectual finish somewhere, which has won for him

the title of Special Johnny, and a seat in the department of the local London County School reserved for psychic curiosities. His hair is generally a dull dusty colour, long and limp, though I do remember on one occasion finding a bright auburn-haired Johnny surrounded by grinning pals, who were making a great show of warming their wicked little hands at his glowing halo. But this was after a rare visit to the local Toilet Club, whence he came to me with head dressed in the last fashion of the true Gutter-dandy, with a long, ragged red fringe crawling into languishing eyes, and said insinuatingly, "Will I be yer little bloke now?"

He wears the native dress — rags, drab and scanty — and his stockings are a minute drapery about the ankle beneath which he trots cheerfully, barefoot alike through bitter frost and gentle rain. He came in now with the frolic of a puppy, too glad in the warm present to remember anything else.

"'E 's goin' to be good boy, 'e's yer Johnny!" he said with a reassuring glance at me. Then his cunning eye lighted on the visitor, quietly

observing him over her tea-cup with amused interest.

Immediately one of those quick changes followed which are a fundamental principle of the slum school, and are grasped by the Gutter-baby long before his aristocratic little cousin in the kindergarten has mastered his A B C.

The smile died on his face, a sudden pathos drew the dimples from his cheeks, and deepened peevish lines round his mouth, the weariness of the world looked out of his eyes, and the little figure drooped into the shamefaced, spiritless stoop which is the birthright of the loafer. He held out both degraded little mercenary hands and dragged his feet heavily across the room. The transformation was complete; in a trice the merry little independent sprite of the Gutter had become that grovelling wretch — the professional beggar!

"Ain't 'ad no dinner, lydy!" he whined.

He was not hungry, he had dined heavily on soup and suet at the Free Kitchen, and there was an immediate prospect of tea, but it was his one trick, and he must show it off, and would do it as well as he knew how.

"Daddy got no bread fer little Johnny!" he went on; "no fire, no nothink; Mother says kind lydy give Johnny a penny — would n't buy drink, oh, no!"

Here he carefully performed his favourite oath, consisting of a solemn pantomime in which he anoints the forefinger of his right hand, makes horrible suggestive indications under his chin, and striking his chest violently says, "Lick finger, cut throat, strike 'art, 'e won't! Johnny no bloo' tow!"

We persuaded him at last to leave off begging, for a little refreshment. He poured the hot tea into his saucer and licked it up like a little purring cat, squatting on the floor in front of the fire, and leering slyly at the visitor.

"Don't cher know me? Wot, not 'er Johnny?" he said, indicating me with a sticky spoon; "thought not nobody don't know me!"

This was how Johnny came to the rescue. Never more will I play hostess in the slums to usurp the Gutter King's throne. There are many high places where he cannot sit at

ease and many environments of life to which he is not able to adapt himself, but in his own native ditch he is supreme, he is magnificent.

My visitor went back from her trip to Gutterland with the picture of a real live Gutter-baby photographed upon her brain, and left behind her five bright shillings which Johnny and I handled long and tenderly before we made up our minds how to invest them. But that belongs to another story, and I do not know whether Johnny will ever let me tell it.

CHAPTER VIII

The Development of Johnny

AT this time the whole planet seemed set in its place among the worlds and fitted up for one great purpose, — the making of my Johnny. This small Self-life seemed to have become a centre of crystallization in the world of matter, hungrily assimilating its environment in the effort to focus its own character. Johnny's development was a procession of transitory moods, uphill and down, through rain and sunshine. He was very good, and the magnetic touch of his friendly little hand in mine, and the infectious music of his merry laugh, could lift one in a golden moment to the third heaven, but the descent was as certain as sudden, and behold! there was not one virtue in him. A torrent of filthy and abusive eloquence, a genius for inventive lies, a furious and bitterly resentful temper, were all components of the remarkable Spirit-Demon which at times pos-

sessed him, and kept the scale of my Johnny's psychostasia well in the balance of retrogression. The bright moments of his baby life, which grew briefer though ever more precious as his little body waxed stronger, were the lurid signals of some terrific and explosive exhibition.

He could sit patiently dreaming in the pauper pew on Sunday evenings, with visionary eyes wandering among the flowers and the altar lights; he would even sing a hymn sometimes in a soft and gentle treble, when the tune caught his ear and the words found some responsive nucleus in the ideation centres of his clouded brain. But the halo would not fit the appalling revelation of Monday morning.

"Johnny must n't go ter meetin' any more," he decided at last. "Teacher sez yer sh'd jes' see 'ow orful 'e is next dy!"

He never had any apology for these occasions, — "Oi jes' goes mad an' 'as the 'eadache somethink crool!" he would say.

Several stormy years of our friendship were slipping by amid mirth and tears, and still

the index of Johnny's mind read reversion to type, — Johnny was not a gentleman.

One had started out as the pioneer of his education with such grand and heroic ideas, under a sky of starry promise. He was to exist in spite of his environment, not in any sort of correspondence with it. He was to be a gentleman of the slums, a Gutter-boy in rags with the motto "noblesse oblige" written all over his young heart.

And here we were left without any ennobling result from our foolish aspirations, with the problem of human reconstruction still staring at us. One had fallen so low as to tolerate the thought of starting with the conversion of the external in the dim hope of persuading oneself that beauty of form is the expression of progress.

"Johnny, if I make you look like a gentleman, could you possibly pretend to be one?"

The proposal was very acceptable to Johnny.

Was there ever a great personality which did not love to pose? Man is fickle even to

the Self-life that he adores, and loves to turn his back on it at times till its crying need recalls him.

Five shillings and a pawnshop did the rest, and my Johnny resuscitated the age of the dandies. He went into the dim recess behind the rows of swinging garments — a picturesque ruddy-cheeked Gutter-baby, happy and eager, a bit cleaner than usual. He came out a wretched little snob, with his head rivetted in a wide collar, his feet moving heavily in stiff hobnailed instruments of torture, and an orange-striped cap on the most hairy point of his skull.

"Will I do? Please, I've come!" he said with a horrible leer.

At least the spectacle of his vanity justified the expenditure. He tweaked and twisted his small body into extraordinary contortions in order to view as much of it as possible from every conceivable angle, he strolled proudly about with his elbows out, he twirled an imaginary cane, and buttoned and unbuttoned his coat a dozen times a minute.

"Ain't it *all* right!" he appealed to me at

intervals, and never knew he was breaking my heart.

How could I take him home to his mother like this and hear her say, "Well, 'e do look a treat!"

On the way we were mercifully relieved of one article; a yellow cat was soliloquizing loudly on somebody's roof as we passed, and Johnny, yielding to the only natural impulse, sent the orange-streaked cap flying into a tree, where it stuck forlornly for many days, until every trace of the gaudy ornamentation had disappeared. A little farther on, his collar burst as he was stooping over a puddle to catch a glimpse of his own loveliness. Already he began to look a little more like himself. For many hours he walked sedately about, the cynosure of every eye, but it was a difficult part for him to keep up. Towards evening I lost sight of him, and went out later in search of him to know the latest development. The sky was alive with stars, set like jewels in a velvet pall, and the moonlight poured down on a scene that does not know the meaning of the hush of night. Like

eerie shadows a group of grimy imps, half-clad and wild with the joy of their play, were darting here and there in the distance, and one grimier and more ragged than the rest came to me in a torn shirt, with one trouser leg ripped up, carrying his boots in his hand.

"I've jes' tiked me gentleman clothes off fer er little rest!" he explained apologetically.

Three days later, there was nothing left of the masquerade but a little grey bundle in the pawnshop, and a crumpled ticket safely stowed away in the heel of a forsaken stocking.

The boots, it is true, lingered for a little while longer, but at last they, too, went home, and I forgot to miss them till one day a few pence in a hot little hand raised in my mind a cruel suspicion that my Johnny was not a man to be trusted.

"Johnny," I cried, thrilled with horror, "where did you get that money from?"

He amused himself for some time playing with my worst fears, and exciting me beyond endurance.

At first he almost confessed that he had "pinched" it, but he couldn't remember where. Then he declared he had "earned it honest," and told a long confused story about it, full of incident, but he couldn't quite finish it, and the pennies had still to be accounted for. At last, having reduced me to a fever of misery, he said condescendingly, "Cum out of it, thin, oi 'll show yer!"

We walked on in silence till our pilgrimage ended abruptly at the corner of the street. There, under three dusty golden balls, swung sadly a little pair of lonely boots. Johnny pointed to them solemnly, and there was a convincing ring of proprietorship in his voice, — "Thim 's moine!"

It was the end of a tremendous failure, and the experience had been a sharp lesson in the methods of evolution. But as I looked into his big impudent eyes and answered the wide smile of self-satisfaction that I found there, I felt just a little less despondent than usual about the development of my Johnny.

To him it had been all a very good joke, and he could afford to be kind.

"Oi wus only 'avin' a game with yer!" he said and encircled me with loving arms, rubbing a little rough head tenderly against my hand. "But weren't it a bloody shame ter worrit yer, though?"

CHAPTER IX

The Gutter Parson

A REMARKABLE fact in the unique history of the Gutter is its utterly insistent continuity. Autocracies and democracies may succeed each other, and kingdoms wax and wane, but we must go on for ever. Here lies buried the ultimate hope of the earth, for here at least is abundant and sufficient witness of the inefficacy and limitations of human systems and organisations. The little Gutter-babies, branded with divine favour, serve a tremendous end, for they are the proof of waste and failure, and even in the measure of natural opulence and glory these have to be accounted for.

Therefore, with an innocent conscience, and an entire lack of prudence, the Gutter continues its rapid process of propagation.

"Gawd only knows where they come from, and Gawd only knows what will become of

them!" says the improvident mother of innumerable Gutter-babies, whose husband is out on the hunger march, and whose eldest is just beginning to earn, as she tells us, with a deep mysterious joy, of what will happen next month.

And so it is that there are always plenty of Gutter-babies.

Sometimes, and especially at certain seasons of the year, or when the family fortunes seem to encourage self-advertisement and ceremonial, it happens even among the pagan Gutter-folk that the young people are seized with the desire to have a show. Then there is a tremendous gathering of the Gutter, and a rainbow shower of confetti round the church and presently a blushing shame-faced boy in a miserably new outfit, and a bold-eyed gorgeous bride, with perhaps even in her escort one or two Gutter-babies, oddly disguised in feathers and ribbons.

Easter morning is a favourite occasion for this sort of pantomime, and is of course exceptionally inconvenient to the ecclesiastical authorities.

Our "Loo" was going to marry Bill Smith like this.

It seemed to Loo that morning that the Easter sun shone as if it "never 'ad before." She and her sisters had been up all night, stitching beads into a pattern on her satin train, but in spite of this she was as fresh as a peach now. The vigorous youth of the Gutter only collapses under the severe and prolonged strain of matrimonial experience and the keeping of the home together, and struggles with fierce contempt against the shock of circumstances and the crushing brutality of overwork and irregular hours.

Although Loo had been reared on bread and dripping and weak tea dust, with a magnificent dinner once a week on Sunday, Bill was justified this morning in his boastful pride of her brilliant muscular beauty. But in less than two years, the memory of this vision of splendid humanity will be over. Loo will be wondering what there is to live for long before then; she will be a wasp-tongued, ill-tempered gossip, looking out at Guttergarten with haggard, disappointed eyes, a

gaunt and weary woman, with her girlhood crushed under the flood of pain and misery which Bill's wife must meet.

The outlook of the young people was not so surprisingly hopeful. There was just enough to eat at home, as indeed there always had been, but Bill had unfortunately managed to lose his work a few days before the wedding.

However, it was unlucky to put things off, and besides, Loo had a tremendous bet that she would have her first baby before she was eighteen, and the months were slipping by.

And so it was to be pulled off.

Loudly the Gutter cheered for our Loo, as in her amazing splendour, with but a poor attempt at concealing her embarrassment and self-consciousness, she sauntered into church smirking and miserable, on the arm of her stepfather; and they were both trying hard to feel as if they were quite accustomed to their eccentric performance. Loo leaned heavily on her gallant protector. He had often made her feel in the way at home, had brutally kicked her out even, more than once,

but they were friends now, and he was pleased and proud of her this day. For it is human to feel conscious of some appreciation for what we are in the act of giving away.

We were all waiting, Loo triumphant, dignified, and brazen; her family coy and facetious; the dense cloud of witnesses that had flowed in from the Gutter gaping, irreverent and hypercritical; and the Gutter Parson, nursing his disapprobation in preoccupied silence, so quiet and watchful that no one caught the warning of the coming storm.

Why did they wait so long?

Loo looked away anxiously down the church, across that tossing sea of dark faces, and she did not find her Bill. For a brief moment the loyal heart of this Gutter bride was strangely troubled.

"I do feel hupset!" she confided to her first maid of honour. Was this, perhaps, some humorous act on the part of the jocose Bill? For the Gutter jest is sometimes pitilessly cruel and drastic. She could almost see him in the imagery of her tortured mind, boasting to his pals at the "Blue Star" with shrieking

mirth, of this most drastic and colossal "sell" that he had so skilfully organized.

But a slight commotion at the door of the church abruptly terminated these unhappy flights of meditation.

Here at last was her Bill, with dishevelled locks and crumpled collar, shoved along between a winking and amused escort, — her Bill, not quite himself!

Still, he had come; he had not failed her, and Loo's anxiety was completely removed.

"Thank Gawd, 'ere 'e is, if 'e 'as 'ad a drop!"

The ceremony commenced and they stood together; Bill's knees were shaking and his eyes vacant, yet all might have gone smoothly but for the uninvited presence of Special Johnny among the chosen guests. It had been impossible for some time past to ignore the persistent interference of Johnny, who had managed to reserve for himself a conspicuous seat in the near proximity of the interesting pair. The ceaseless hum and commotion within the sacred building was punctuated by the patient perseverance of Johnny's

mother as she vainly strove to control his movements.

"B'ave yerself, can't yer, yer little devil? Wait till I get yer 'ome!"

But threats were idle words to Special Johnny, and his audacity increased, until, in a wild moment of sudden temptation, he dug Bill violently in the ribs, and that unfortunate person, being in no condition to receive such advances, released his self-control in a tremendous guffaw that burst from him in a thunder of merriment, and died in a terrified whine amid the shocked silence of the suddenly subdued Gutter. It was then that the Gutter Parson took definite action.

Perhaps it would be worth while to look at the Gutter Parson for a minute while he is here, though we must often meet him in the Gutter, in his shabby cassock and his "funny little 'at!"

Here is a curious phenomenon of nature,—a gentleman and a scholar, who for some reason or other has chosen to associate himself with the pain and poverty, the reeking squalor, the sin and devilry of the Gutter.

It almost persuades the Man in the Gutter to believe sometimes in the genuineness of his attitude; though of course he does try to kid them now and then! There was Johnny's mother, for instance, who asked for milk when the baby was choking with the whooping-cough last winter, and the Gutter Parson just looked at her and said, —

"My good woman, am I a cow?"

"Of course 'e were n't no cow, but babies want milk, and wot are parsons paid fer!"

For the Man in the Gutter is conscious only of a body that gets hungry and hurts, and a soul that is capable of bitter hatred and the sting of fear.

Yet the Gutter Parson can hold his own with the heart of the Gutter. I have seen him in the suffocating atmosphere of the mission-hall, through the thick clouds of foul tobacco-smoke, perched on his little platform before a wild mass of the darkest humanity of London, gathered together by the bribery of a "pipe and a bellyful," a small and not imposing figure, with a curly head and a boyish smile that the years had never been able to

steal from us, an unconscious and magnificent display of leadership, as with one weak hand lifted from time to time against that vast and powerful throng he controlled and restrained and silenced their fierce emotions at his will.

The Gutter Parson is dead. We killed him in his own Gutter with our importunity and our hopelessness and our peculiar ingratitude. But we could not bury him.

Last Good Friday, old widow Judy, reputed by an ancient tradition of the Gutter-babies to be a spy in the pay of the police, heard the thin treble of a familiar hymn-tune through the confused tumult of the holiday-making street, and rose up in her warm corner of the "Blue Star," where she sat with her pipe and glass, sheltering from the east wind and picking up scraps of gossip. Straining her own drunken voice to that faint echo, she began a dizzy, perilous dance which landed her out into the Gutter, with her mocking words and her evil mocking gestures, just as the procession from the Mission, headed by the great Crucifix in the hard strong hands of a huge navvy in corduroys, with the dust and

odour of his labour still upon him, came round the corner.

A few holiday-makers stopped to laugh, a small acolyte put out his arm to push her aside. But between Judy and that stalwart crucifer swept some swift and silent warning. Suddenly flinging up her hands, with a loud unearthly yell the old creature fell forward, her face livid in the waving torchlight as the procession filed solemnly past her.

"Oh, my Gawd," she moaned, "did yer see 'im there plain as daylight? And me drunk ag'in!"

Sometimes hurrying through the market in the early morning, at a particular bend in the road I meet an aged travelling hawker, with a lean pack on his stooping shoulders. His wife is dying in the Infirmary, looking forward eagerly to a happy release, and he earns hardly the few pence to pay for his bed in the common lodging-house which is his home. But he is an Oxford man, and belongs to one of the best families in England.

As we shake hands and exchange a few remarks with an absurd enthusiasm about

the weather, our minds fly back, shrinking into the narrow atmosphere of a stuffy mission-hall, and we are conscious of being again in the ghostly society of the Gutter Parson.

And now before his ungentle discipline this wedding party crept silently away in their shame and confusion, leaving behind them a sensation of strange calm and stillness.

Outside, everyone took a different view of things; the sun was still warm and bright, and Bill revived a little in the fresh air. No one felt inclined to be really serious or miserable, so they decided to continue the festivities as if there had been no interrupting catastrophe in the programme.

Later on, when Bill and Loo were visited in their new home, they had agreed not to "bother about no parsons now."

That night, behind the warm light in the window of his snug den, the Gutter Parson had company, and entertained Special Johnny.

"I'll play yer buttons!" said his small guest, when they had cleared the supper.

He produced a handful and the game began.

"That's a two-er, and that's a three-er, and this 'ere's a tenner!" he said, laying it down with due respect and watching it with loving eyes.

The game continued with furious excitement and deadly seriousness. Suddenly there was a fierce exclamation from Johnny, and a small fist surprised the Gutter Parson's left eyebrow.

"Oo-er! yer bloody cheat!" said Johnny. "What, did n't yer lick yer bleedin' thumb twice? Now say yer did n't, yer swindlin' liar!"

This is the most quarrelsome and wrangling game that the Gutter-babies play, and they fight bitterly over it, but no one but the Gutter Parson would lick his finger more than once in picking up the buttons. At ten o'clock, when Johnny stood on the doorstep, with red cheeks, and twisting his cap in his hands, he said,—

"It were little Johnny spoiled that show this mornin'."

Nobody else would have thought it quite

in proportion to play buttons all the evening with a juvenile lunatic for the purpose of obtaining this minute and obvious information.

But herein lay at once the foolishness and the genius of our Gutter Parson.

CHAPTER X

How the Gutter-Babies Go

THE most romantic and conspicuous thing that a Gutter-baby can do is to die.

In Guttergarten, one can of course be born blind or crooked or Special, but to be really famous it is necessary to have also made the last grave venture.

Although it is the common lot of humanity, even in the Gutter, yet whenever it happens it ensures to the individual the immense esteem and affection of his relatives, of which perhaps in the time of normal health he may have sometimes felt doubtful; and it also marks him as the centre of local excitement. For there is nothing dearer to the heart of the Gutter than the passing bell, or one mysterious visitation of the Last Comer.

I stood in a road fringed with bobbing rows of Gutter-babies, and we were all staring at the great red-brick Fort of the Salva-

tion Army, as it loomed before us with its long flight of wide stone steps. At my elbow Johnny dodged and bothered and damned the universe, because he could not see when there was nothing to be seen, and all about us in front and behind surged an hysterical crowd talking volubly of the boy who had died.

Only last week he had been a white-faced, overworked grocer's assistant, of no particular interest to anyone except the widowed mother and the family of brothers and sisters whom he supported. Now he was a hero, and the sympathy of the Gutter had gathered about his memory.

No one had cared when he turned up the collar of his thin coat and coughed as he went out to his work in the morning, and nobody worried much when he tossed and moaned in his fever, and the doctor ordered things that could not be got for him.

But now he was a hero, and soon every head would be bared to him and every handkerchief wet for him, and every heart would go out to him, and all because he slept with

his tired hands idle beneath the cornet and military cap and the white flowers that crowned his coffin.

"A pore good-livin' young feller he was, took off sudden without a note of warning in a gallopin' consumption!"

So they waited and stared to see the poor body passed out under the Flag through that dreadful hush of the silenced Gutter.

"I seed his little whistle!" shrieked Johnny.

The bobbing plumes of the horses, the bright uniform of his comrades, and the winding serpent of the singing women with their white ribbons fluttering were wiped out of sight by a sudden turn in the road, and the crowd dispersed lingeringly.

The Gutter-babies have crossed themselves and said their prayers, and now they will go softly about their play all the afternoon, and to-night will cuddle closer together as they dream of the boy who died.

But the widow and the wailing family will come back from the cemetery presently, and there will be ham for tea, and perhaps later on local talent will provide a little music, for

the insurance has been drawn out and now they must dance and sing till daybreak, and drink to the boy who died.

Earn was going to do this tremendous thing; he lay in his little bed with sunken cheeks and staring eyes and his nostrils working hard as he fought for five minutes more of the Gutter life he had loved.

"Double pommonia, that's it," said his mother with an apron to her eye, "and he such a pride, and no 'opes of him now, and his brother will fret his heart out, they ain't never been parted. The Lord knows I did my best. But what can you expect of seven months?"

So Earn left us.

Only I (known always now in the family circle as the young person who witnessed our "pore Earn's going-off"), and I suppose the priest who held up his little shriven soul to meet the Last Comer, knew that Earn had sacrificed himself to a myth. But the Gutter canonized him all the same. He would never be called a lying little hound again, and months would not count for much in that

new place where Earn must achieve manhood. To-morrow Alf will be bragging about his twin brother in Heaven, and Johnny will discuss eschatology in detail, and the Gutter-babies will wonder and dream and quickly forget that the Last Comer has been so near to them.

There will be Mass of the Holy Angels, and prayers, and gay flowers, and perhaps later a painted window in the singers' gallery paid for by Gutter-babies' pennies, but few tears for the Gutter-baby that died. For the problem of Earn's mother has been solved at last and this was the best — perhaps the only way — for a Seven Months to grow up. Anyway, what else could you expect?

There are of course other modes of exit for Gutter-babies. The hooters proclaimed one o'clock loudly, as turning homeward one morning after a long round, I met all the Gutter-babies scampering round a corner in a panic, breathless and round-eyed with fear.

"Run! run!" screamed Johnny, as he fled past me, apparently for his life.

'Run! run!' screamed Johnny

"The Kidnapper's in our street!"

An imposing and dignified person in uniform was approaching. He had shrewd kindly eyes and a soft manner, and he enquired for one Murphy.

Defiant mothers turned up their sleeves to be ready for him, and loafing fathers watched his steady progress maliciously, and still he continued to search persistently for the home of the Murphies, for no one seemed willing to further such a quest. Behind came the patter of Johnny's bare feet; he had pulled himself together and returned to see the fun under my protection. But there was more than curiosity in his eager whisper.

"Don't let him have my Mary, the thievin' bounder; she's walkin' out with me on Sunday!"

And he disappeared as swiftly and cunningly as he had come.

Meanwhile the Kidnapper had found his man.

He went up the steps of number nine and knocked irritably, then he descended to the area and did not knock, but walked straight

in, and I know what he found, for I had been there first.

He found an evil-smelling underground hovel with a few sticks of furniture, and live things clinging to the walls and prancing about the floor, and in the midst an imbecile man, unshaven and half-dressed, and two infant boys, the eldest scarce able to crawl, and they were all waiting dismally. A charitably disposed person had made an attempt at feeding them from a cup of Quaker Oats, and the biggest and most helpless baby was the idiot father. He saw this and shuddered, but he did not find Johnny's Mary. For she was sitting curled up in my armchair playing with a doll just where I had left her when she came to tell me that "Mummy had gone away with the gentleman upstairs, and please would I come at once."

When the Kidnapper is about, somebody has to hold the Gutter-babies very fast if we do not want them to go.

CHAPTER XI

The Minding of a Gutter-Baby

SOMETHING had happened to the place where I lived. The going-out of it was attended with vague regrets and the coming-in was full of exquisite and thrilling excitement. The familiar features of the shabby rooms had ceased to be inanimate matter. The distempered walls seemed friendly and affectionate, and no longer bald patches where prints and books might live and accumulate. Small ornaments in their accustomed places developed a distinct personality. A hole in the rug, a portion of the door from which the paint had been removed by a Gutter-baby's boot, a discoloured patch on the ceiling, where Johnny had played patball with an over-ripe orange, aroused in me kindly feelings. And the secret of my initiation into this unaccustomed atmosphere was the coming of Mary.

For tucked away in this new place that

had so suddenly and sweetly become a home, in a little camp-bed arranged for its own special convenience, a real, live Gutter-baby slept and smiled.

The small change in my domestic affairs had miraculously affected the whole universe, and earth and heaven were new because Mary had come to me. The heart of that life, which, with its ache and pain, and intensity of tears and laughter, lay outside the individualism of a lonely tramp, called and beckoned to me now. This warm spring morning, I was a part of things, in tune with the hum of the city, in sympathy with the crowding souls about me and their lofty interests. For it mattered to me also tremendously if the rain kept off, if the price of bread went up or down, if a meal were late, or an egg bad or good, for I too had great possessions, a baby and a home.

But as I peeped and held my breath and peeped again, upon my shocked and paralysed intelligence there flashed suddenly the tremendous problem of the minding of Mary. I could think of no one, even in the inner

circle of highly critical friends and relations, who would be at all likely to assist me in such an extremity. Of course one knew people who kept pigs and poultry and colonies of spotted mice, but everybody drew the line at Gutter-babies. In the whole vast library of current literature I could think of nothing that dealt with the subject. "Hints to Mothers" only reminded me with a new pang that I was an impostor, and there was a significant silence about Gutter-babies among the things women should know. I began to be almost ashamed and fearful of my unique position. But at this point Mary awoke, and having unburdened me of my uneasy secret, decided the whole matter once for all by explaining that what was necessary to the proper nutrition and education of Mary, she herself would certainly know, and would as certainly demand; a self-confidence which the subsequent methods of Mary entirely justified.

But as Mary lay sweetly sleeping while the hours crept slowly into dawn, dim doubts and fears chased themselves in a flying pro-

cession through my tired brain. Was it possible to spoil Mary? One often heard of spoilt children, but how was it done? Of course I had seen Gutter-babies spoiled in different ways — a little girl with her nose smashed in by a drunken father's blow — Gutter-babies who had been taught to lie and shop-lift, who had big pockets stitched inside their small frocks, Gutter-babies with scarred faces and broken limbs. But were these the only dangers to be avoided in the minding of Mary? Might she be kissed too often or fed too well or loved too dearly?

In the morning Mary would tell me, for she would be sure to know. But before the first bird had sung to the first sunbeam, before the light had been able to wake me through the shuttered window, the patter of small pink feet, the fierce embrace of little arms, the warm and vigorous kiss of Mary assured me that there was to be, at least, no dry level of benevolence in this new life.

Gradually the minding of her settled down into a peculiarly simple affair. The bath was the scene of our one real quarrel.

"We don't wash of a mornin'," said Mary, and stuck to it valiantly in spite of threats and persuasions. After a long and exhausting discussion, for I could not ignore the fact that, in spite of the vigorous scrubbing of the previous evening, daylight betrayed that our efforts had been superficial, and a great deal still remained to come off, we came to terms.

"I will, if I 'as jam on my dinner piece!"

Mary emerged pink and hungry from the soapsuds. "Wants me breakfus'!" she stated. "Give me a penny!"

The penny was produced, and Mary pattered across the road to the opposite stores, where everything in Gutterland can be bought in the same department at popular prices.

She returned with a drop of thin milk in a cup, a few lumps of sugar, and an armful of stale bread.

I watched her preparations for this frugal meal with some interest. Having fetched a saucepan from the kitchen, with small independent and capable hands she poured the contents of the cup into it, and sat down to watch it warm on the fire.

"I likes a 'ot breakfus'," she explained as she continued her preparations eagerly. From time to time she put out a busy finger and stirred the milk gently. When it had reached the required temperature, she drank it out of the saucepan with evident enjoyment, throwing in bits of bread, and gnawing at the dry crusts.

"This will last me through the mornin'," she informed me. And so I learned my first lesson in the feeding of a Gutter-baby.

The next important consideration was the clothing of the little body. Clothes may be a ridiculous habit, invented in the first place for the indulgence of personal vanity which desires to add to individual attraction by a slight variation from type, yet in spite of this Mary's appearance as we took our first walk abroad irritated me excessively.

What would the Gutter be without "rags and tatters"? But one does not care to be responsible for the disreputable condition of one of the picturesque little people.

So we bought a wardrobe for Mary. There were strange little soft pink garments, that

made Mary first wonder and smile and afterwards swear and wriggle with discomfort, and there were new boots that pinched and creaked; but the only thing that Mary really cared about and that made her forget everything else was a little brown fur cap, which she saw in the window, marked one and eleven pence.

"Buy it! Buy it!" she insisted; and when it was given to her she hugged and kissed it continuously, murmuring in ecstasy to its unresponsive soul, "Oh, my dear pussy!"

Later, I bitterly regretted the episode of the fur cap, and fierce flames of jealousy consumed me. I was forgotten, and all Mary's devotion and caresses extravagantly bestowed upon this inanimate and shapeless skin. Even at night it was not thrown aside, and the eccentric appearance of Mary asleep, with her curls still framed in fur, might have been humorous if I had not felt it to be tragic.

But the minding of Mary, with its many strange lessons and its ever increasing initiation into the ways and habits of a Gutter-

baby, was an absorbing occupation in which one would have gladly spent many lives and asked greedily for more.

It was left to the loyal and faithful Johnny to bring back the wandering affections of Mary. He came in one morning with a filthy mongrel puppy yapping feebly in his arms.

"'E's a pore orphan!" he said mournfully; "never 'ad neither father nor mother, pore little feller, an' now 'e'll 'ave a good 'ome!" I did not like the arrangement, but Mary did, and the orphan made himself at home at once. His pleasure became gradually more and more demonstrative and violent as he chased us excitedly round the room, working himself up into that ecstatic abandonment of joy which only the dumb things seem to know. Suddenly with a delighted yelp he attacked the enemy. Johnny and I made heroic efforts at rescue, but I think we all knew from the first that the fate of Mary's pussy was sealed. The orphan remained with us for the rest of his life. To the Gutter-babies he was a gentle and sympathetic playmate, and they wept for him bitterly when he was run over by a

milk-cart a few days later. But we had no more pussies.

One cannot tell what might have been the development of this joyous environment if Mary had stayed to cultivate it, but this did not happen.

Months passed, during which my Gutter-baby fitted herself securely into the small corner of our home life. I had tuned my ears to the clatter of her little boots as she came in from school, and strung my nerves to the shrill greeting of her cheery voice calling eagerly for "Miss." I had come to realise at last that certain portions of the day belonged to her. The solid dinner and the pleasures of our simple table must be permitted entirely to absorb and monopolise my attention between twelve and two; and the time after tea until Mary's uncertain retiring hour was indisputably hers also.

Gradually and almost imperceptibly a subtle transformation was making for us a new Mary. Her language as she skipped about her play, or kicked her ball along the Gutter with Johnny was much less shock-

ingly eloquent, and she had ceased to horrify society and endanger her own life by eating off the edge of her knife. She had begun to be minutely interested in the arrangement of her black curls, and with huge physical efforts, accompanied by abnormal sighs and violent breathing exercises, to introduce the letter "H" into her vocabulary. Psychically there may have been some small advance in Mary since the day of her first attendance at Mass, when after five minutes' patient endurance she appealed to me wearily, "Please, I'm very sick of this!"

But Johnny had already begun to watch her with secret disapproval. She was under the suspicion of Guttergarten. For she was no longer quite one of us, and where was it all going to end? Slowly I began to realise what had happened. I had caught a Gutter-baby, but in the taming of it I had lost it, and instead I was rearing as a changeling that social derelict, the outsider and the bounder. In the most effectual and hopeless way of all, I had succeeded in spoiling Mary. But the fate that rules the destinies of Gutter-babies was

not so easily cheated, and the Gutter was not long in claiming its own.

I can remember the occasion well. It was in the middle of our play-hour after tea, and Mary was dancing to her shadow on the wall, when a message from the Infirmary came to summon me. I was in time to find Murphy conscious. He lay propped up on pillows, dying fast, with his sad wild eyes full of pain. But he had something to say to me first. He recognised me with the last flicker of his sinking intelligence.

"'Ullo, mate," he said. I suppose it was sweet to see, even in that moment when the unknown was disclosing its great mystery, a familiar face from the old Gutter-life that had cast him off. And then his weakness and pain reasserted itself, and he became querulous.

"I ain't never done no wrong to no one, and now I'm dyin'," whined the imbecile; and then, remembering his motive in sending for me, "You ain't forgot 'er?" he said, alluding to his faithless woman. "She runned away with the feller upstairs; she don't worry

after me no more, nor the kids; it'll be the 'Ouse for them, that's about it. But when the boys goes, says I, Mary goes too; I won't 'ave 'er playin' me lady and 'er brothers in the 'Ouse, so they all got to go, see? Their Grandma'll fix it up. Now, none of yer bleedin' games; I'll turn in me blasted corfin first!"

It was no use reasoning with this poor disordered brain in the last effort to secure justice for its deserted progeny. So I left him to die, this worn-out child that the Gutter had never been able to nurse into a man.

It was not long before that mighty Moloch of the State swallowed up Mary before my eyes. She did not go without some reluctance, "I want me brothers bad," she said wistfully, "and I suppose there's lots of children there to play with, but I 'opes they'll give me me bellyful to eat; I should n't 'arf miss it now."

So she went out of our life, and Johnny said it was better so. "'Er were n't no good," he said; "too much of 'er mother in 'er fer me." And then, with a kindly wish to com-

fort me, he added, "Yer little Johnny loves yer still."

But among the numerous instructive accidents and illuminating observations of Gutter experience, I made a mental note of this important fragment of science. A Gutter-baby is not a domestic pet, and when caught deteriorates rapidly in the process of civilization.

CHAPTER XII

A Grandmother in Guttergarten

THERE is one person who has in recent years completely reorganised her position in Guttergarten. From an habitual state of homeless poverty and helpless appeal, and an uncertain livelihood of swindling and beggary, she has risen lately to a condition of respectable affluence and absolute independence. She is, in fact, the only person in Guttergarten who has private means, and blessed is the household which entertains a Grandmother. It is true that the day has come at last when she may no longer use those wrinkled hands, so worn and hardened with the merciless battle of a life's struggle for existence. That day of weakness and failure, so cruelly feared in the past and so bravely postponed from week to week, through those alarming years of backache and depression and swiftly increasing incompetence, has come at last to the Grandmother,

and, after all, it was only in the foretaste that it was bitter; and now the Grandmother sits in her own chair, set like a throne in the joyless home of her son-in-law, with folded hands and placid, smiling lips, a dignified and consciously welcome guest. It may have been a little hard, perhaps, to turn up her sleeves over the bones of those withered arms for the last time among her mates, but the tear of farewell had scarcely started on its way along the furrows in those shrunken cheeks before it must suddenly evaporate in the sunny atmosphere of the Grandmother's birthday congratulations.

She was just seventy to-day.

Through the open window of her one-roomed attic home, which also sheltered her granddaughter, Lizzie, who had lately been crowded out by her Gutter-baby brothers and sisters, ascended the sudden tumult of the street, as a semi-clothed and scarcely awakened humanity tumbled out of warm beds to battle against the sharp and blustering wind on their way to work. For the Gutter-world was about again.

The reiteration of a long enforced habit soon stirred the heavy lids and feeble energies of the Grandmother, and presently she awoke. She was quite alone, for the curl-pin decorated head of Lizzie, though much against its will, had long been lifted from the pillow beside her. There had been few moments in the Grandmother's experience so free from human correspondence, so full of this great silence and refreshment. The strange new atmosphere had hidden in it almost a sting of pain, and she listened with a secret pleasure to the steady purposed tread of that procession of toilers in the street below, and began to wonder if they were all as tired as she was. Involuntarily she stretched out those worn hands of hers, with their dreadful story of slavish struggles and anxious competition written in the seamed and horny palms and registered fatally in each knotted joint and enlarged knuckle. And now she was to realise at last that they had won their ease. To-day she might lie while the late sunbeams played about her pillows, heedless or defiant through the shrill warning of other people's

alarm-clocks and the merciless din of hooters. For the Sunday of a Grandmother's life had come to her.

Yet it was intolerable to have abandoned her place in the grinding machinery of the Gutter-market; bitter to be cast off by this toiling life of oppression and pain, in which she had lived so heartily, and to which all the children of the Gutter cling so tenaciously. Only yesterday she had felt its grip upon her body, had been almost fainting under the lash of its rigorous and exacting cruelty. For since her superannuation at the laundry, the Grandmother had taken in other people's Gutter-babies to mind, and it had been a very strenuous occupation. The cunning and unprincipled Gutter-babies took an unfair advantage of her genuine and overscrupulous anxiety to please the hot, tired mothers when they dropped in one by one at feeding-times. And as soon as they could lisp, they told of those secret moral lapses of the Grandmother so deeply impressed upon their little minds by the spiteful slaps of her exhausted patience. For it is an unspoken rule in Gutter-

garten that you must not "pay" anyone's Gutter-baby except your own.

But to-day the Gutter-babies were all more or less feebly protesting against the ministrations of some attentive stranger, and there would be no loud-voiced women calling up the stairs to her, to relieve them of their living bundles.

"Mrs. 'Ammond, jes' give an eye to my Cissie while I goes to the Baths with me bits."

The Grandmother began to feel lonely.

Here was peace after battle; but the proud spirit of the old war-horse was pawing the air; and yet how weary were those stiff and rheumatic limbs as she turned again to her slumber. Had they ever seemed so weary before? A morbid shadow flitted across the Grandmother's dream. She was thinking of her sweetheart. For he had been called away from her side before he could draw even the first instalment of his pension, and it was so lonely to be a Grandmother without a sweetheart. And then it was that the last Playmate arrived just at the psychological moment, when the hours of the Grandmother's

life were rushing up towards the measureless reality; that Playmate who was never to desert her, whose echoing song was earth's sweetest music, and the magic of whose touch peopled naked monotony with an immortal society. There he was, the ghost of That-which-has-been, astride on the high-backed chair where the Grandmother had long ago nursed her own Gutter-babies, which had been so tenderly set in its place to await the coming of the sweetheart, where later on in the category of time she knitted a perpetual sock, and supervised the recreation of the third generation. And thus he came to her, the friend of the extreme need, with the profound sympathy of his superhuman correspondence.

And he alone could speak her language, and his people were indeed most peculiarly her people. And so the Grandmother passed into her new home, and sat on the old chair, where this ghostly rider perched and chattered in the joyless shadows of the son-in-law's kitchen.

About her footstool the younger portion of her Lizzie's abundant family quarrelled and

bit at each other and spilled their scanty dinners. And somewhere in the mysterious region just beyond the horizon of her dimmed spectacles, the blurred vision of the elder Lizzie's patient face looked at her full of gratitude.

"Mother, it's such a 'elp to 'ave your little bit comin' in to-day."

And it was a proud moment when the newsboy Billy came in clumsily, to ask in deep confusion if Grannie could just lend him a trifle to tide him over the week. It was to her, as a matter of course, that the little ones came clamouring for pennies on Saturdays, when Daddy was out of work and their raging thirst for ice cream or jumbled toffee became intolerable. And when Teddie sat at home crying forlornly because his boots were gone on Monday morning, and he was losing a medal by his absence from school, it was the Grandmother again that came to the rescue.

It is, indeed, little to be wondered at, then, that there had been so fierce a competition among the independent members of the fam-

ily circle for the privilege of offering hospitality to the Grandmother. There had once been a time when the Grandmother, looking forward to the coming fortune, had planned to live on in the sweet solitude of the little attic home. But the white despairing face of the elder Lizzie, and the pitiful recital of her suffering and wrongs, quickly dissipated this self-centred scheme. It is to be hoped that her splendid welcome and royal position of benefactress, as she readily disembarrassed herself each week of her earthly possessions, cast about her an aura of beatitude which somehow compensated to her for the turmoil and discomfort of the son-in-law's hospitality. Amid the wailing of neglected and undisciplined Gutter-babies, and the peevish gossip of the elder Lizzie, and the drunken furies of the son-in-law — amid all the confusion and chaos of Gutter domesticity the Grandmother passed her last days with the Playmate.

Utterly deaf and nearly blind, the Grandmother was now almost quite unresponsive to the world of sense. Her little shrunken

figure rocked itself backwards and forwards on the old chair, as her fingers flew automatically over the perpetual sock, and into its bottomless capacity, as the stitches accumulated under the clicking needles, was slowly collecting all the humorous philosophy and tender wit of the merry ghost of "That-which-has-been." It was now scarcely possible for any human being to hold correspondence with her. Head and heart and hand were pledged to the Playmate, and he was off on some mad venture through his fairyland of ghostly memory beyond the consciousness of matter and mind.

Yet at times the ghost of "That-which-has-been" had strange psychic stirrings and dim religious yearnings in the depths of his being.

Then they would send imperatively for the Gutter Parson. But the mystery of his communications with the Grandmother, and those shadowy confidences which reached him from the ghostly land, are buried now with the Gutter Parson's genius for human correspondence.

It was about six months after the great

birthday, I should think, that these three friends, the Grandmother, the Playmate, and the Gutter Parson met for the last time on earth.

She had not been able to feel us near her all day.

On her lips was set that meaningless and mirthless smile which the ghostly companion had frozen there, and on her tired face grey shadows had deepened. Her fingers had been much less active than usual, and the perpetual sock, with its wide content of mystery, hung collapsed upon her bosom.

"She ain't near so well to-day, are yer, Grannie?" said the elder Lizzie, in answer to all enquiries, but no word reached the Grandmother. It must have been late in the afternoon that the Gutter Parson came, for the three friends drank tea and condensed milk together. It would be a little distasteful to the Gutter Parson, for I remember he did not sweeten his tea. We could not have assisted at that strange feast even then, or have mingled in the secret sympathy of that wonderful trio, and now they have all passed

from us into a yet more unfathomable reserve. And so we must leave them.

I suppose the scales which hid the world of sense from those unenquiring eyes were never lifted once during that *séance*, and the Gutter Parson did not make his attack through the Grandmother's ear-trumpet, yet he set up an electric battery of sympathy somehow. And then the sign of his conquest over that amazing personality was her acceptance of his gift of tobacco.

It was only a very little while after the Gutter Parson had left that the Grandmother laid aside her pipe and fell off her chair into a little bundle that now meant nothing at all.

CHAPTER XIII

The Gutter Philanthropy

IT sometimes happens that very good people make perilous descents into the Gutter with vaguely benevolent intentions of doing something for the little Gutter-babies. Perhaps it is well for them that they realise the peril quite as little as the madness of their enterprise. Such efforts are, generally speaking, associated with inglorious failure. Here in the Gutter we do not like very good people, and we have no use at all for anything vague and indefinite. We know so well what we want, and we want it desperately, we want it now.

The tremendous need of the Gutter is in the eternal "at once" of things, as once in the creature's childhood a door was shut, as once in the fulness of time God's Heart broke. It is too great a thing to play with. But the idle rich find another toy for their restless wits. For while they are congratulating each

other upon the effect of their schemes upon the England of an unborn generation, we want our breakfast! And so the Gutter teaches its little ones to spit in the faces of those they beg from.

Like good angels these dear creatures come, with plenty of fur trimming and silk underskirts, and kid gloves to pat the Gutter-babies' heads. And, oh, that in their beautiful condescension they might know how we hate them!

"Ain't yer got a big boa, Miss," said an awe-struck factory girl in the Evening Social, as she stroked tenderly a long serpent of skinned moles.

"Yes, dear!" responded the visitor, with rash amiability; "would you like to try it on?"

"Gawd, no, Miss, I might look like a lydy!"

But they brighten the lives of the little wild people by affording them such innocent amusement.

A small flower-seller, fresh from the lock-up where she had been paying the penalty of setting down her basket on the pavement, to

rest her tired arms for one moment, had just had a merry meeting with one of them.

"Gawd love yer, Miss," she said, "did yer see 'er chuckin' 'er weight about? I offers 'er me boot-lace wot I just took off for a copper, and I says I ain't no 'ome, nor ain't I, Gawd knows.

"'My pore gal,' says she, 'ain't yer no reference?'

"'No,' says I, 'I bin in service this three year, and the lydy's dead.' That's wot I says, Gawd forgive me! So 'er says ter me, 'Ho,' says she, 'well, my pore gal, I could n't 'ave yer without no reference,' and 'er outs with this penny and smiles!"

Rosie was homeless at fifteen; her only friend was the loafing boy who had ruined her; the pretty face lifted to me was pinched and piteous; yet she could sit down in the Gutter and forget everything in a convulsion of honest enjoyment over the bitter irony of that philanthropic smile!

Meanwhile the good angel proceeds upon her benevolent path distributing cautious pennies and inopportune gaiety.

At the end of the street, one overhears the Twins' Mother warning the yellow-haired Alf against "her like"!

"I 'll tear the liver out of you, if yer touches any of 'er dirty chink, so there now! 'er ain't up to no good, enticin' of the pore children after 'er!"

Long before the penny bank has failed, I expect, the Gutter-babies' attitude will have become bold and defiant. They will be pirouetting behind her in an absurd and insulting caricature of her "'mincin' hairs!" They will be yelling after her, "Not in that 'at!" "Wot, all for the same money!" And thus they will escort her, even to the farthest limits of Guttergarten!

Safe at home again, the philanthropist is not always satisfied with such a defeat, but continues to cherish her earth-reforming schemes, and presently, perhaps, attempts another and more carefully organised attack. A little philanthropic office is opened in a cautiously selected locality, and if the financier is wise, there should be behind the desk an official with a wide experience of the eccen-

tric life and wonderful habits of the Gutterfolk, disguised under an innocent and kindly exterior.

Hastening out with an empty dish and a sixpence to fetch my dinner on one occasion I met Mrs. Sly, who was immediately inspired by the fleeting vision of my obvious errand to relieve me of so much superfluous cash.

"Mornin', Miss!" she said; and then as I reluctantly resigned my place in the long queue outside the cookshop, she became lachrymose.

"Did yer know as 'ow me pore Lizzie was dead?"

I had not had any previous intimation of the fact, and was duly shocked. Lizzie was one of the inner circle of my friends, a sharp-tongued, bright-faced little match-factory girl, who had kept her parents and an idle brother and her married sister's family out of the House ever since she had been old enough to use her own busy little hands.

"Yes, Miss, 'er's lyin' dead in a 'ome at Margate this very minnit! The fun'ral's at

two, and I just come out ter see if I can find any money, fer 'ow ter git there I don't know! It seems as if I was to meet you, don't it, Miss? And me pore Lizzie 'er always thought the world of you, Miss!"

As I turned away with an empty dish, the church clock struck one with a shocking precision, and I reflected that the chase for Lizzie's funeral would be a heated one!

Presently a string of girls linked together at the elbows swung round me, monopolising the pavement, and from the centre the ghost of Lizzie in splendid material condition greeted me noisily.

"'Ullo, Miss, 'ow's yer luck?"

It is such incidents as this that finish off and complete the bitter education of a Gutter philanthropist.

But the imposition of the Gutter is not frequently so superficial. When it happens to be, it is a special insult to the feeble perception of the particular victim upon whom it is seemingly not worth while to waste the higher gifts of mendacity, and it is a vain thing to challenge the matchless repartee of

the Gutter tongue. Here, for instance, is Special Johnny, who has been sent to get in the shopping, struggling with the splendid spoils of the local market! One hand is occupied with part of an orange snatched from a stall en route, in the other is secreted the sticky change, and the rest of the orange is distributed about his person; a colossal and abominably green cabbage is tucked under his arm, and at his side two ghastly rabbits dangle unpleasantly, and a parcel of assorted groceries has disgorged its contents at his feet.

One is glad, of course, to be of any service to a pal in such difficult circumstances, but as one accompanies him homewards, bearing the least revolting half of the treasure, it occurs to one that a basket would do just as well.

"Ain't got no bloody bag!" objected Johnny sulkily.

But it could be got for fourpence, and Johnny had bruised the cabbage and lost half his groceries; the rabbits had been dragged through every puddle, and I had

been led at least a quarter of a mile out of my original course. In consideration of domestic economy and the public convenience, Johnny ought to take a bag when he went shopping.

"Garn!" says Special Johnny; "stop yer jaw; the 'ares would eat the greens!"

Someone once suggested, for the sake of Blanchie's profession, that her accent ought to be improved. So we teased her on the matter of vowels.

"Can't say food, can you, Blanchie!" we jeered.

"I kin sy fule!" returned Blanchie, and dismissed the subject.

The other day I watched the return of a friend of mine from a week-end expedition. A few doors from her destination a cunning loafer started in pursuit of her cab, and as she alighted presented himself in a panting and exhausted condition. His services were not required, but the pathos of his imagination produced a small coin from a bulgy purse.

"I've er widder and two children at 'ome, lydy!"

Suddenly I observed the donor's finger and thumb close severely over sixpence, as if conscious of some discrepancy in the narrative.

"You silly fellow, how can your wife be a widow?" she enquired with deep suspicion.

"Lydy, 'er's me mother," lied the scoundrel glibly.

He did not account for the children, but I suppose the suspicious person had had enough of him. At the corner he turned back as he spat viciously on the gift!

"Thought yer got me, did n't yer!" he jeered offensively.

By this time the door of the little Philanthropic Office is swinging behind the first applicant.

"Please, Miss, I wants er Phropic!" explains a stout bronchial person with a baby in a fit of whooping-cough under her arm! "I lives at 25, in the Market!"

"Oh, come now," one says, "I think there must be a little mistake somewhere!" For one is more intelligent than seems to be apparent. "What is your landlady's name? I

wonder if you remember Mrs. Kirby, do you?"

"I don't know er nime, Miss, I ain't bin there long. I 'aves a little slip room at the back, and I just goes in and out, and takes no notice of no one, Miss!"

When persuasions and suggestions have all failed, it is necessary to resort to more drastic treatment.

"Now look here, Mrs. Kirby, I happen to know you don't live at number 25!"

"I knows I do!" protests Mrs. Kirby, and retires swearing at my promise to call on her at home.

After office hours an official visit is paid to number 25, where the landlady happens to be the Twins' mother.

The usual topics must be discussed and all the minute formulæ of a Gutter call observed faithfully. The weather was mild for the time of year, the laundry season was starting. "Pore Earn" had been buried nearly a twelvemonth. Blanchie was n't doing much, and had worn out another pair of shoes practising her skipping on the "hashphalt," al-

though her foster father had thrashed her till he could n't hold up his arm any more. Finally, Mrs. Kirby did not live there, of course, but someone had called and asked to have a "phropic ticket" sent there for them. That was her, no doubt, but you had to be so careful what you said to such people, because "they give you a dab in the face for two pins!"

After a great deal of trouble, when Mrs. Kirby is eventually discovered, her displeasure and contempt are violent!

"S'pose you knew I don't live there now? And what if I don't, yer hypocritin' swine, nosin' round me! If yer calls that Charity, keep it, then."

Much more has to be borne with seeming indifference, and presently one may be able to get in a word, for even the vocabulary of Mrs. Kirby is not inexhaustible.

"And now tell me why you wanted me to help you!"

There is a sudden paralysis of this atmospheric storm, as if some electric current had been unexpectedly disconnected, for the soul

of Kirby is a battle-scene of many emotions. I am a "nosey intruder" who has made her out a liar, but underneath this great wave of resentment, the deep of one human sympathy is calling imperatively to another.

The thin lines of Kirby's mouth have collapsed forlornly, and the world of Kirby is wrapped in a wet blanket.

"The baby was a-cryin' fer bread!"

Through this labyrinth of lies and professional inquisition, we had at last arrived at the fact, which, in the exquisite pathos of its simplicity, has in the story of Man forced the granaries of Heaven, claimed the sympathy of Mary's Son, and still has weight to touch the heart of a State.

A Gutter-baby was hungry!

There is of course a less conspicuous and far more genuine system of philanthropy working very quietly within the Gutter!

At the top of number 25, a little dressmaker's improver is dying slowly of cancer, dying as she has lived in a lonely agonising struggle against a pitiless destiny. But the Twins' mother is kind in her attention, and is

letting the rent run on unnoticed, and there is no shameful appeal here for Charity. Every pay-day her mates drop in one by one on their way from the work-room and leave a shilling behind them. Any feeble suggestion of the Infirmary or philanthropic interference from without is met with fierce objections.

"We've kep' yer all this time, 'ave n't we? and we'll see yer don't want fer nothink till the end; don't cher fret, Nell, me darlin'!"

How some of these people live is a complete mystery to the local Committee, and they are never tired of making long speeches about it at their frequent sessions; then the Gutter Parson lifts an intelligent eyebrow and *says* that he wonders, too!

Somewhere or other below the muddle and blunder, there trickles a thin, clear stream of kindliness, and if ever the person on the platform has enough of the genius of human correspondence to sweat barearmed with tired workers, to sit at meat among Our Set, and drop a penny into the pocket of Special Johnny without being laughed at, it will be Morning in the Gutter!

CHAPTER XIV

A Silent Sappho

IT was born one spring morning quite early, before the day was sure that it was to-day,—a little thing and perhaps not so very wonderful, but to her who brought it forth strangely enchanting. She was a Poetess and lived in a tiny dark slip room in a narrow winding slum. She never burned the midnight oil, for she was too poor to waste even a tallow candle. But sometimes she struck a match and watched the little black head burst into a sickly flame that travelled slowly down the stick, until it scorched her poor thin fingers. She did not live quite alone. There was a melancholy white terrier with projecting hips and moist eyes, who hid in the cupboard by day and only ventured out at night like the great overgrown rats which filled him with fear. For the Poetess had no licence. She called him Flossy, a playful name that was never meant for him; happily

he had no sense of humour and answered to it with one spotted ear alert, and a snivelling nose against her cheek.

And he would sit for hours, while the Poetess read to him snatches of verse, and his stumpy tail thumped approval in the dust as though in a vain effort to scan the quaint metre. So the Poetess and the dog and the Thing lived together and hardly knew themselves for happiness. Every morning the Poetess went out for a walk, and brought back a number of wire coronets, and some soft hairy stuff which she wound round them to make pads for fine ladies to increase the dimensions of their heads. And so the Poetess was dependent on the caprice of feminine vanity for a day's work and bread enough to eat. The trade had been unusually slack of late, and in the home of the Poetess the financial situation became serious as the winter months dragged wearily on. Day after day, the Poetess came home with a dwindling bundle, half a stale loaf, and a dark piece of meat, for which Flossy fought bravely with the rats. The dog began to fret

and pine, whining through the long hours of his lonely vigil in the cupboard, and during his brief nightly freedom became too querulous to appreciate the companionship of the Poetess. But the Thing grew and throve extraordinarily, and at night when the room was dark and silent, and Flossy lay still in the shape of a whiting and breathing hard at the end of the bed, It almost seemed to be another soul. Sometimes It cried like a child at its mother's breast and wept because the Poetess could not satisfy It. Sometimes It seemed to be a great bird that beat its wild wings against the low roof and tore at the rattling window pane and carried her up, up, high up above the moon, and she sighed and asked if that was fame. But when the morning came, she drew It back like a schoolboy's kite, nursing It away in her bosom again, and went out for the walk to the factory that grew longer every time, with the Gutter-babies yelling after her, "Ragged Molly! long-haired Molly!" For Gutter-babies can be very silly sometimes. They did not recognise within the eyes of the Poetess the glim-

mer of that divine enthusiasm which no insolence can quench, and they never guessed that under the rags, warm and live against her breaking heart, slept a treasure that no thieving hand could ever find.

But Ragged Molly had one champion: over the darkened intellect and perverse mind of my Johnny the Poetess and her eccentric establishment exercised a marvellous influence. The hours when he ought to have been occupied profitably in the Special School were spent inside Ragged Molly's cupboard where the two odd little outcasts, the dog without a licence and the human boy whom Society had labelled "Special," hid together from the law and kept each other warm. Long after he ought to have been in bed, when his mother was calling "Johnny! Johnny!" across the deserted Rec, the Poetess was teaching him long stories in verse, and making him say them to her again as he sat at her feet, a tamed and gentle little Johnny, fascinated by her pale face and wildly brilliant eyes. They were able sometimes to speak of the Thing, and they did not know that this

was the Gift of Tongues, or that the school of the Mystics would have been glad to claim them as their own. In the bitter world of Ragged Molly, the wayward fitful sympathy of my Johnny must have been a sweet and cheerful influence. Yet in the end it was Johnny who betrayed her.

The Poetess was proud of her poverty. "Great Chatterton starved," she would say, "and so must we!"

But there came a day when she crawled back wearily with empty hands, and Flossy's eager expectant greeting ended in a wail of disappointment, as he went back to cover with his tail between his legs.

When the Visitor called, she was permitted for the first time, after many attempts, to enter the home of the Poetess. She was a common person; by that I mean, as I dare say you know, that when one first looked at her one felt quite sure that one had seen her somewhere before, and when one looked away one forgot what she was like altogether. And she always said the obvious thing in the most obvious way, which would not matter at all,

The poetess teaching long stories in verse

only it is so seldom the excellent thing or the acceptable way. Her gloves were out at the fingers from poking in empty pockets for phantom pennies, and she had as many names as there are days in the week, and was received courteously or not, accordingly. On Mondays nobody was very keen—she was the Boot Club. Some people jerked untidy heads out of upper windows and screamed, "Nothink for yer ter-dy, Miss!" Others grumbled because the wind blew in their faces when they opened the door. Tuesday she was "Charity," and everyone had to remember to get up late, and sad-faced Gutter-babies learnt off by heart long and pitiful stories to recite to her, and woe, indeed, to any improvident little rascal who had failed in courtesy on that day. Sometimes she was "Blue Ribbon," and had herself to remember to look the other way when the ceaseless procession of thirsty jugs clinked cheerfully past her in the dinner hour. Sometimes she was the Church, and scattered light literature about whenever she got inside a door, which was not often, and everyone said they

would certainly come, but after she had gone the young Gutter-babies ate up the tickets, and in the evening the little Visitor peered anxiously out of a forlorn Mission Hall into an empty street, and then went back again to arrange the chairs differently. Her home was set in a great building like a rabbit warren with long stone passages and innumerable other little homes inside it full of Gutter-babies, full of human life and human wrongs.

Once in the window which held the longest sunbeam, a gilded cage had swung a speckled-breasted thrush above the winter snows. But as the mornings grew brighter, the poor prisoner sang love-songs to a geranium pot in the next-door flat, and died broken-hearted in the spring.

And once the little Visitor had caught a real live Gutter-baby of her own and tamed it. There had been a wonderful reign of love then in the lonely home, but quite suddenly one day the Gutter-baby grew up and ran away.

Even the Poetess, starving slowly to death

in her garret, was better off. For she had something to nurse and cuddle and hide, which is all a woman wants to make her happy.

Now when these two, the Visitor and the Poetess, met, a curious thing happened; the Visitor quite forgot why she had come, forgot to ask impertinent questions or to demand the rent-book or to peer into unlikely places for pawn-tickets, and the Poetess felt like some little bird sitting on a nest that has been discovered, for she knew that this common shabby person had scented the glorious existence of the Thing.

The Visitor looked round the comfortless, pitiful little home with its dreadful secret of a heart's struggle and despair, and even the poor necessities of bare existence seemed to wear the semblance of wealth and luxury there. She promised everything she had to the Poetess in exchange for the Thing.

"Give it to me!" she said, "just to mind and nurse and educate for you, and by and by it will bring us money and fame."

But no desire of earth could touch the

heart of Ragged Molly where it lay twisted in the warm embrace, which with cooing and soft laughter and song was already lifting her into a perfect heaven of love and delight. Not for anything that worlds might give must this strange and heavenly companion be sold to the children of men. And soon the little Visitor found herself in the cold wind-swept street, feeling like Hannah when she stood with her enemies in the gate, and in her ears rang the voice of Ragged Molly, — "You will go and tell your world of the poor Poetess, but you will never be able to tell of what you have seen to-day!"

Some day there will be a long silence in the little chamber, and presently a curious neighbour will force open the door to stare at the Poetess lying very quietly, with her head pillowed in rags on the floor, and watched by a sad-eyed terrier with a weak hysterical bark. Then someone will remember that great Chatterton starved, but nobody will be able to find the Thing.

CHAPTER XV

The Gutter-Baby Mystic

NO one has very seriously persuaded the obstinate Paganism of the Gutter Mind.

Often in the story of Guttergarten some remarkable person has given us his life and the Gutter has been irresistibly drawn into the magnetic atmosphere of a great human influence.

We might, indeed, easily find here enough copy to write in heavy volumes our own Acta Sanctorum within the White Circle of kindly sympathy and creative holiness which they have cast down in the swinish heart of Guttergarten.

In the breath of our gibes and stinging sneers, spattered with the Gutter-babies' muddy insults, with their vitality and enthusiasm daily spent and sucked away by the exacting devotion and vampire greed which has at last slain them in our service, the

Gutter Saints have lived among us and been entertained. And we have seen their passing with a shocked reverence and the dumb sense of a deep personal loss.

And still Guttergarten is unconverted, and still day after day the Gutter Parson tramps a hostile, devil-haunted district, and travels patiently backwards and forwards from the little grim Mission Chapel, where the noisy bell summons him so frequently and so imperiously with its persistent and unmusical clamouring. And day after day he comes back, as the shadows are gathering in the silence of his lonely den, to kick off his dusty boots with the same tired sigh, and the same unchanging conclusion, — "Well, there's no religion in them!"

When the Stranger and the Enemy come to talk with the Gutter Parson upon the very scene of his herculean labours, he has no imposing red-brick building to mark the line of progress on the dingy map of his energies, no overpopulous night-clubs, covering themselves with glory on field and river, and scarcely a handful of the faithful in the dim

chapel, gathered under the red lamp,—only that homely, sordid, slowly-sinking life of his, so soon to startle us with the divine enthusiasm of the last flicker.

The Gutter Parson's task is but a little less complicated than that offered to the Catholic Church by the heathen empire in the day of many gods and many creeds.

For deep below the superficial indifference of Guttergarten slumbers the mighty giant of Primitive Religion, and his waking movements, as he gropes towards the Light, are varied in expression.

Among the little wild people themselves the favourite and most precious symbols of the Eternal Mysticism are, I think, quite indisputably the Bonfire, the Garden, and the Grotto.

From the earliest days of crawling infancy, when the great facts of existence first began to find a nucleus of interest in the Special mind of Johnny, the mysterious inspiring cry of "Fire" had been the most splendid invitation that his Gutter-world offered to him. In the chill dim hours of the

lonely winter morning, as one by one the warm bodies of his earthly friends left the family bed to scatter reluctantly about their several vocations, the Gutter-baby, shivering in the nakedness of his material rags, watched the solemn birthday of the fire, and learned to look forward eagerly to the illuminated moment when he might be old enough to be trusted to assist at that tremendous function and find out for himself the puzzling secret locked away in the common things of coal and wood. As his mother fed the infant flames and nursed them tenderly into a ferocious energy, it was with other eyes than hers that the Gutter-baby beheld that growing living Thing, writhing and dilating in the shrine of the sooty grate. He marked each leaping motion of this strange phenomenon and in the glow of its radiating atmosphere he nestled, curiously charmed and thrilled. The tiny cold blue hands are lifted up to the kindly blaze, and closer creeps the little body until Special Johnny is looking into the heart of the Fire King, as it slowly unfolds to him its story.

Through the high grill of the "Regulation Guard," countless fiery serpent tongues hiss their utterance to the eternal mysteries. There the twisting fire-faces smile and beckon to him, yawning caverns open in the reddening coal, and among the bright colours of the rising flames spring fairy obelisks and dream palaces. In the long hours of silent communion, cheering the bitter and incomparable loneliness of a human babyhood, Special Johnny cements his Fire friendship.

But the growing and materializing process of the Gutter-baby soon excommunicates him from the Sacred Shrine. In a little while his lengthening limbs seem to be in everyone's way, the Regulation Guard is required for drying the new baby's little garments, and the big chair by the fire belongs to Daddy and must not be crawled upon by little boys. And so the Gutter-baby, with the Flame Secret buried in the fast prison of his young heart, goes out into the cold world. And there he learns the mighty force and volume of his friend when he has escaped from the control of the Regulation Guard. Following

the challenge of the fire cry and the signal wreaths of blue smoke against the flame-lit sky, he scrambles and struggles among the crowd which has collected at the summons of the magic word. The long columns of the red enemy shoot up the condemned building, the white faces of threatened victims stare out at him with torture-stricken eyes. He hears the thundering roll of wheels upon the hard road, there is fire dancing below the swinging body of the Flame Chariot. It darts in glancing rays from the helmets of those closely clinging riders, it scatters in brilliant fireworks under the stinging beat of galloping hoofs.

For the third time in the experience of Special Johnny, the Lawses' little oil-shop was burning fiercely.

The Lawses themselves had put their family to bed and were out on a shopping expedition. So there were children in there, Gutter-babies like himself who had loved the Fire! Gutter-babies, perhaps, who had searched the Gutter for fragments of real coal, and gathered the forbidden twigs in the parks

and front gardens of the West, who had saved their pennies to buy the precious black knobs to drop into the greedy devouring red mouth, and risked their little bodies in stealing from the wood-yard. Gutter-babies who had wept in the hard times for the Fire that died of starvation.

And now they were suffocating in the cruel remorseless grip of the Fire Fiend's wrath.

For many days after, the charred ruin of the Lawses' devastated home, and the shrinking fear of those three little stiffening bodies paralysed the mind of Special Johnny.

But there were other moods in which he might still seek safely the society of his old friends. On his reluctant way to the Special School every morning, the blacksmith's forge never failed to arrest his speculative attention. Here the merry army of glowing sparks springing from the anvil filled the world with a shower of golden insect life and tickled his childish fancy into dreamland again.

Once more the old irresistible fascination of the Fire King was upon him, and so it happens that in every sheltered nook and cranny

of the windswept Gutter streets we find recent traces of the Gutter-baby's Fire-worship. Here, where the ashes are scarcely scattered and the ground is blackened and strewn with the débris of charred sticks and dead matches, has squatted sometime the figure of a tiny Gutter-baby philosopher, and with infinite tenderness has nursed his little god.

How much all this has to do with the grotesque miniature architecture so skilfully and delicately erected, in the eagerly appropriated sites of Guttergarten, I suppose even the Gutter-baby himself will never be able to tell us.

"Please 'member the Grotto!"

An evil-smelling oyster shell in a grubby and persistent little hand, and a pleading cockney voice is at our elbow. And lo! we are standing unsuspectingly on the very threshold of a Lilliputian cave of Mysteries. Into what stupendous psychic adventure have we now stumbled? Is this the sanctuary of a miniature Corycian Cavern wherein, perhaps in the rent chasm of a winkle-shell, the dread Typhon yet nurses his wrath? Perhaps

Please 'member the Grotto!

we have never before quite realised the immense fact of the Grotto in the development of human experience.

It may be the lament of Adonis, or an echo from the Crib, that we shall hear in this little Bethlehem of Guttergarten.

But we must not forget to look for the Gutter-baby Gardener. Very much is being done just now to encourage him by the local authorities.

In the arid desert of the asphalt "Rec" one spot, apparently quite deliberately set apart for the purpose of Tree-worship, is fenced off with barbed wire and high yew hedges from the devastating explorations of Gutter-baby adventurers. Here, with round and envious eyes, and impotently greedy fingers, Special Johnny may cultivate an appreciation for the stunted newly planted shrubs and sooty beds of geraniums, far removed from the reach of his plundering capacity. Serious, indeed, would be the case of any presumptuous Gutter-baby who might trespass on those hallowed precincts, or, squirming his small body between the forti-

fications, dare to carry off in a hot little hand one fading bloom.

And yet, unwatched and unguarded in another part of the open "Rec," the same Gutter-baby, unchecked by any official restraint, learns the vicious secrets of brutal men and evil-mouthed women.

But soon in the Special mind of Johnny the old Adam wakes from slumber.

"Back to the land."

And long before the Feast of the Midsummer Saint the bare wall of the Gutter cottages are hung with bright-coloured little pot-gardens, charging the thick atmosphere of Guttergarten with the heavy scent of their ephemeral sweetness, varied at intervals by the narrow prisons of caged songbirds.

Were the Gutter Parson to be passing just now and were he to stop to reconsider his condemnation of the Soul of Guttergarten, he might perhaps be tempted to plant a little seed in the rich soil of pagan imagination and sit down beside the Bonfire and the Grotto under the little swinging pot-gardens of Adonis, to tell the eternal tragedy of the Sun-god, who, while

the Gutter-babies are gently dreaming, sets out every night on his little boat on that perilous voyage through the Moon's white heart into the fields of the Morning Rose. A little audience would gradually gather about him, open-mouthed and semi-articulate, with eager questions, and perhaps even a loutish overgrown Gutter-baby, on his way back from the day's work, would be gladly welcomed in their midst.

"Daddy, come and listen to our fairy tale!"

But the big Gutter-baby stops only a moment with his foolish vacant stare, and as he turns away to his own little temple of Dionysus, his beer-muddled, unreceptive brain forms its brief conclusion, —

"Damned rot!"

Perhaps after all the Gutter Parson did not make any mistake!

CHAPTER XVI

The Crown of Thorns

THERE is a certain kind of super-special Gutter-baby who has no place even in the diversified scheme of Guttergarten.

The deaf Gutter-babies and the blind Gutter-babies, the Gutter-babies who have fits, even those who are distinguished by peculiar tendencies towards certain moral accomplishments, and the poor little Gutter-babies who have dead mothers and fathers, are all eagerly appropriated by various asylums almost as soon as their different eccentricities have declared themselves.

But it is not so with this Gutter-baby.

And day by day, as the enormous numbers of the maimed and crippled little people are sorted out, and tenderly gathered up by good Samaritan omnibuses, to be deposited in their own particular pigeon-holes for education, there is one Gutter-baby who always stretches

out appealing little hands in vain. For nobody wants this super-special Gutter-baby.

To the round bright eyes of this Gutter-baby the gladness of earth's springtime means nothing at all, and it does not know whether the new garment that gives such supreme pleasure to this little egoist is red or green. The sound of the great World-voice reaches those little grimy, self-assertively projecting ears through a blanket soaked with dulled intelligence. This Gutter-baby speaks with a thickened stubborn tongue its own language of confused gibberish which conveys little or no meaning to anyone. And often it rolls purposelessly upon the floor, and beats its curly tangled head against the wall with the pain of a life which cannot be interpreted.

And yet this Gutter-baby is not really deaf, nor can it be medically certified as blind or insane. It is just a super-special Gutter-baby. It must not disturb even the gentle discipline of the Special school-room, and it must not ride away in the omnibus with the little maimed people. This Gutter-baby has got to learn to manage its own little crippled

life for itself, because it has been declared perfectly ineducable. And so it will run wild all over Guttergarten, becoming always more and more a derelict of Gutter-baby society, and always less easily influenced by the world of sense, until at last some of those little devils who are so lively in Guttergarten catch the little body for themselves. And they do not often leave it until they have brought it to the prison or the madhouse.

A Gutter-baby after this type was our Bess.

A "fair picture!" her father said she was, and worshipped her. And certainly she possessed that comparatively rare and attractive gift of Gutter beauty. Her round bright eyes were marvellous, notwithstanding the fact that they were of so little use to her, and the heavy curls about her suffering little head were amber-rich. Every limb was sound and straight, and her small delicately modelled features gave no freakish suggestions. Her firm chin was set as boldly as any self-reliant little spirit could have moulded it, and yet she had no means whatever of communication with us, and seemed to live in a little

world of her own fixed far away from ours. For a long time she used to sit on the seat beside Johnny on his rare visits to the Special School and it was during this period, I suppose, that the great friendship ripened which was destined to play so large a part in the psychic museum of Guttergarten.

It was an idle morning in March, with the smell of spring in the air, and a certain sharpness rushing in through the open window. Blanchie had just cleared a little corner in the muddle of occupations which had failed to absorb my attention, and had disappeared up the street on the urgent quest of dinners. Meanwhile I hung myself out of the window and watched the busy traffic of the Gutter-world.

Opposite me, like a great hive, was a three-storeyed building secreting in its self-contained capacity six little overpopulated two-roomed homes.

A dull, prosaic Gutter Castle it appeared, high and straight, with two windows and a little one on each storey, varied on the ground floor by a heavy door flung wide with

invitation, disclosing a splash of red tiles and an oak staircase within. In its crude innocence of romance and suggestion it was loyally typical of the superficial semblance of commonplace monotony which shelters from publicity the tragic heart of Guttergarten. And yet that Gutter Castle door, as it swings backwards and forwards in the sunshine, is scratched all over with many of the great names of Guttergarten, and up and down those steep and narrow stairs the Gutter Parson has hunted many priceless souls. There sometime the famous Twins had arrived, in the days before Prosperity had driven the family into another atmosphere. There, too, behind the top window left, the deathless tragedy of the two Lizzies was being dragged out. And there in the son-in-law's home the Ghastly Playmate had celebrated his mysteries and the Grandmother had been carried out.

Within that grim Gutter Castle even now women hugged dreadful secrets, and from it men went out into the night for strange crimes. There had wandered, prying, many

an inquisitive little soul to be hurried into the pain and punishment, the uttermost woe of Gutter Birth.

All round about within its shadow small shops have been ruined and hastily vacated and picturesque hovels picked to pieces, giving up their dry bones and leaving Gutter-babies and rats homeless.

But the Gutter Castle remains, stern against the caprice of progress and decay, and guards in secret its tender memories of human tears and wreckage.

Presently the elder Lizzie threw up her window and hung three parts of her anatomy outside it. It was between school-hours, and the children of all the homes in the street seemed to be tossing buttons and quarrelling with each other below.

"Bring yerself in before I kills yer!" she called to the bootless Teddy, who was occupied in playing prisoners, and was at that moment in the act of being strapped down, and hoisted insecurely upon a miniature ambulance.

Suddenly, catching my wandering eye, she sustained an obvious shock.

"My! Miss, yer fair frit me!" she observed. "But they may as well 'ave a dinner whiles they can get it, there won't be any for none of us next week!"

In the road between us a woman stopped, open-mouthed and greedily intelligent.

"Ain't yer man finishin' up on Saturday, Mrs. Sly?" she shouted up at us. But only the silence of Lizzie's sarcasm floated down to her from the upper world.

It was Mrs. Kirby, with a dull afternoon before her at the laundry: it would have been greatly cheered by that little gleaning of gossip about the elder Lizzie, and the prospect of passing it on to her mates, but she went away disappointed.

"Nosey old Parker, ain't 'er now?" shouted Lizzie to her retreating back; "I guess my children 'll 'ave new clothes, boots, and all afore yours then, you cat! Calls 'erself a woman!"

Below, Teddy had taken up the defence of the family honour, and was viciously tormenting the confused Kirby.

"Old Sally Witch, Old Sally Witch!" he

shrieked after her, in tones of meaningless and piercing monotony.

On the ground floor, Mrs. Jones, with her nerves harassed and unstrung in the supreme effort of feeding her numerous consumptive family, who were even more "finnicky" and "nice" over their scanty fare than usual, became suddenly exasperated.

With heated countenance and bare red arms, she rushed out upon the surprised Teddy in his valiant enterprise, and smacked his face for him. "Yer owdacious little 'ound," she cried between her blows; "stop yer mouth with one of *them!*"

But Teddy's disfigured mouth was not to be permanently so subdued; squeals of pain and indignation soon drew forth the elder Lizzie's energetic head again upon the scene, and huge consternation seized us all. For the utterly Unforgivable, the Gutter Impossible had happened, and we were petrified. Mrs. Jones had "paid" another woman's Gutter-baby. Within the withered bosom of the elder Lizzie, which had never at any time been able substantially to satisfy one of her

wailing babies, Primitive Idea was struggling but feebly. Lizzie's Man was at home swearing, the soup began to smell burnt, and the younger Lizzie had not yet come in. But Gutter Maternity had been outraged, the situation screamed for the fury of righteous violence, and the elder Lizzie bravely rose for the cause, and worked up her feeble constitution to meet the demand.

From that upper window she gave us an adequately disgusting exhibition of feminine ferocity. She spat and swore and stormed herself into exhaustion. "Not that 'e don't deserve it," she finished, "that I won't deny, but 'oo touches any child of mine does it over my dead body!"

Teddy had begun to see humour in his mother's eloquence.

"Votes for women!" he said, winking disloyally in my direction.

For Mrs. Jones there was no way out except by denial.

"Yer lyin' devil, ooer! yer miserable little 'ound! yer wicked cat, yer, sayin' as 'ow I touched yer dirty face! I would n't soil one

of me fingers with 'im, Mrs. Sly! Of course, if yer goin' ter listen ter wot 'e ses, I may as well as go hin-side! The lyin' brat. Only fancy! sayin' as 'ow I soiled me finger on 'im, the wicked cat!"

"Oh, well, Mrs. Jones," said the elder Lizzie, who had accomplished her duty, and was over-weary already of the argument, and anxious to be pacified, "if yer did n't 'it 'im, there's no more ter be said, but next time 'e don't b'ave isself, me and 'is dadda prefers ter 'it 'im ourselves, Mrs. Jones!"

The tremendous episode was closed, but as Mrs. Jones swept past Teddy into retirement, she waved a threatening fist in his face.

"I'll knock the bloomin' 'ead off of you!" she promised him.

The screams of Teddy, after he had arrived at the top floor, told us that he was already being "lawfully paid" for making a disturbance. By this time Blanchie's eager legs were bearing the dinners round the corner.

"Pork, Miss. 'As there been a row?" she asked, as she dished up. We began to eat.

"Sad news I 'eard, Miss; Johnny's comin' in presently ter tell you all about it like, so don't be knowing; I said as 'ow I would n't tell yer; but Bess she's been told not ter come to school, and she's no mother, and 'er daft and all, — shame I calls it, don't you, Miss? Ain't this pork er treat?"

Johnny came in a little later with his dreadful news. There was no doubt about it. Our Bess had been condemned. "Governess" wept, and Johnny and Company were rude about it, and the rest of us fussed and appealed to authorities and aggravated speeches and Committee meetings. But it was no use at all. London had spoken, our Bess was ineducable, — she was not anybody's affair. There was a lethal chamber for little impossible dogs; perhaps some day . . . ? But (of course it was a pity) no place could be found in the whole scheme of Guttergarten for the super-special Gutter-baby.

We made such a fuss that at last we roused the Gutter Parson, who did not generally distinguish much between common Guttergarten babies and Specials.

"You see they all have souls, have n't they, dear?"

He came to see the super-special Gutter-baby with a handful of sticky sweets and a queer little fur animal, which he called a "Billy Possum," sticking out of his pocket. Bess understood his attentions perfectly well. Here at last was a human being who talked her language. She sucked the sweets and rolled on the floor with the "Billy Possum" and chattered inarticulately to the Guest. Afterwards we all wanted to know the Gutter Parson's opinion of the case of the super-special Gutter-baby.

"Well, dear," he began, smoothing out his cassock, and lighting his pipe for a chat, "the visit, I think, was a great success, on the whole!"

But had he nothing to contribute to the enormous variety of opinion and suggestion that had gathered round the complex problem of our Bess?

Surely he had some hint of an idea to give us in this complicated crisis?

"Well, dear," he ventured at last, after

much persuasion, "I certainly think it is very awkward that the little one has no mother."

It seemed an obvious conclusion to have arrived at after all our fuss and energy, and he himself seemed innocently pleased with it. It is little to be wondered at that, just then, we were really disappointed in our Gutter Parson.

But he was always so immensely practical in his conclusions. He went on just telling us all what a pity it was that our Bess had no mother, until at last he found someone with a little money who agreed with him. I do not suppose that the Gutter Parson has solved the riddle of the super-special Gutter-babies, but there is at least one little home now in Guttergarten where they can find a nursery for their temporary needs, until their glorious destiny unfolds itself to them. For, as the Gutter Parson says, "We may hope great things for them in the Future, since we are not all privileged to wear the Thorns here!"

CHAPTER XVII

"At Home" in Guttergarten

PLEASE, Miss, would it suit yer fer me ter come up just now?"

It was the voice of the Twins' Mother, who stood in the sunshine under my window and sought admittance.

I pushed a friendly head out over the window ledge, and shouted down an invitation. But my visitor had already been engaged in conversation by the Strange Person next door, and so, having a few minutes at least to wait, I turned my attention upon the Gutter Castle opposite. There in the top storey I noticed the enquiring nose of the elder Lizzie thrust between the lace curtains, and below in the yard I observed Teddy warning the alarmed Alfie of his Mother's proximity, and helping him to climb into the giant dustbin, where he crushed down the lid upon his yellow head.

But there was a pause in the animated

volley of questions from the next-door window, and once again the voice of the Twins' Mother addressed me, —

"Did yer shout, Miss?"

I had seen a barrel-organ, wheeling round the corner at the top of the street, and as it set up its merry tune and gathered the Gutter-babies quickly into an admiring ring, I began to speculate upon the mental agony of Alfie in his insanitary prison-house.

"Did yer cry, Miss?" called the voice from below again, anxious for admittance.

"Oh, yes, come up, please, Mrs. Ball!"

And she came, panting heavily up the narrow stairs. She sat down nervously on the extreme edge of the wooden chair, which I was careful to wipe for her with the true hospitality and courtesy of the Gutter Hostess, and looked round her curiously. What the good lady saw appeared in some mysterious way to discomfort her exceedingly, for she became gradually less and less at her ease and more and more reserved about the real object of her visit.

The Twins' Mother was obviously far too

respectable to be a real friend to us, and I watched her growing embarrassment with honest concern as she sat before me, pretentious and self-conscious and a little too vulgarly fat.

"Ain't it a warm dy?" she began, after an awkward pause, during which we had both of us searched our vocabulary wildly for something appropriate and worthy of the tremendous occasion. It was a relief to have found a topic, and we both clung to it with mutual eagerness.

"Yer feels it, I sh'd think, don't yer, Miss? I can't abear these 'ere mucky little flats meself. I'm sure I've often said to Blanchie as 'ow I don't know as 'ow you can stop in the street for a 'our, and I tells Alfie if I catches 'e a-playin' 'ere, I'll give 'e somethink, and 'is father, too!"

Her attention was fortunately quite entirely occupied by the uncongenial circumstances in which she found herself now unpleasantly fixed. But outside, in the asphalt court of the Gutter Castle, a miserable little figure had just emerged cautiously from its

hiding-place, and stood like a forlorn and hunted little rabbit while Teddy busily picked a large portion of the contents of the giant dust-bin out of its fluffy hair. In "Our Set" we had often despised Alfie and longed to get at his effeminate taste with a pair of scissors, but just now I felt in my heart only the tenderest pity for him, which increased as his mother continued to protract her visit.

And still I remained in complete ignorance as to what I owed the pleasure of her companionship.

At last the Twins' Mother, with a severe rheumatic twinge, rose from her chair and prepared to make her departure. That great psychological moment had at last arrived for which we had been working up our emotions during the whole of the constrained interview. Mrs. Ball must now speak and I must hear. Beads of perspiration gathered among the worried lines on her brow; she fidgetted nervously with her satin bonnet-strings, and at last began: —

"Seein' as 'ow you 'pears to 'ave took er fancy to our Blanchie, Miss, me and Mr.

Ball was a-thinkin' together as 'ow it might be just as well if you 'ad 'er altogether. The father 'e don't py nothink fer 'er now, come this two year, and we was thinkin' as 'ow you might make a little out of 'er; she do earn, but not near so much now as she should, and it don't py us to 'ave 'er, not by no means. She won't turn out no credit neither; she's got a bad mother to 'er and all, and me and Mr. Ball, of course, as you'll understand, Miss, we 'as ter think of our connection!"

It was out at last, and, after all, just then it did not seem such a tremendous proposition. Beneath the gross impertinence of the scheme there lurked probably some generous and affectionate ambition for the Art-nursling, who must always have been an impossible duckling in the baby farm of the Twins' Mother. But it was the aggressive pathos of the situation that really conquered and bewildered me.

In Guttergarten there is a certain pretentious portion of the lower middle class which besieges one's sympathy and literally clamours for consideration. There are tremendous

odds against one in dealing with a person so intensely and extravagantly pathetic as Mrs. Ball. One never dares to pity the tragic figure of the homeless Gutter hero, who in spite of his rags and poverty yet manages to preserve in every crisis the gracious and almost condescending dignity of the splendid appeal of Guttergarten. I am persuaded that it was the pathetic respectability of Mrs. Ball that overcame me.

The patient struggles of Ragged Molly the Poetess, the confessions of Special Johnny, the fateful career of the two Lizzies in the Gutter Castle, could not have moved me so completely as this episode with the Twins' Mother. A long experience has taught me to look out over the writhing anguished picture of Guttergarten with cold eyes and cynical unconcern, but Mrs. Ball with a headache or an unprofitable nurse child was completely disarming. It is most unfair to the British Public that they should be exposed to the inconvenient attacks of such incurably pathetic maniacs.

I even found myself hanging out of the

window again, to supervise her safe retreat as far as the corner, so thoroughly were my deepest sympathies aroused. I had vague fears that one of those heavy milk drays, with their clanging cargo of empty cans, might swing round the corner, as they often do, and interrupt her homeward journey.

It was with an exquisite sense of comfort that I saw her at last, in spite of her pathetic breeding, turn in at the "Blue Star." As I hung there above the eternal Game of Guttergarten, the Strange Woman next door stuck out a head.

"Evenin'," she said, and I politely repeated the word after her. I knew that she was a Strange Woman. I knew also that she would make suspicious and enterprising little dives into the Psychic Me, to search there for any kinship with her own Strange Sisterhood. And yet I hung on there, like a huge human porcupine covered with self-righteous bristles, where her poor soul might sting and flay itself.

"Ain't this er Nole ter live in, darlin' ?" she began.

I explained cautiously, with due consideration of the shock which I might be inflicting, that it was my unswerving loyalty and devotion to the "Nole" which held me glued and fascinated in the deep of it.

"Well, I suppose yer keeps yerself ter yerself, anyways, don't cher?"

Below us Blanchie, with a new air of homeliness, was playing Johnny "up the line" on my doorstep.

"Ain't yer respectable, then?" went on the Strange One.

I indignantly denied the abominable charge.

"I'm comin' in ter call on yer, me dear," announced the Strange Woman, and withdrew her head.

I sent Blanchie on an errand, and waited nervously. Up my stairs came the heavy uncertain tread of the Stranger, and ceased suddenly. In the silence that followed I heard a shuddering sob, and looking out observed the situation.

On the wall over the tiny twisting staircase hung a cheap Crucifix, and below, reeling

The Strange Woman lurched against the bannisters!

against the painted banisters, scarcely sober, lurched the Strange Woman with her tears. And even as I watched and wondered what it meant, she drew herself together and crept away into a more familiar atmosphere with shaking shoulders, and Heaven only knows what misery in her heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Elder Lizzie

"SCABBY 'ead, yer lousy!"

"I ain't; — lousy yerself."

"Git out of it!"

"I 'll gob in yer eye — take that!"

Over the way, in the asphalt court of the Gutter Castle, two of the little wild people were quarrelling on the new green seats which the London County Council have this summer generously placed at their disposal.

I was in time to see Blanchie carry out her unpleasant threat very efficaciously. But I had by this time suffered some sharp experiences in the rearing of Gutter-babies, and this one should know what was best for herself. I did not, therefore, interfere in their little differences. It was certainly not my fault that Blanchie had left off her stockings temporarily and was wearing a rusty jersey over her scrappy petticoats. The pose of her slim

bare ankles, and the naughty mischief in her face veiled under a web of tangled black hair, innocent just now of curls and ribbons, was still oddly suggestive of the Music Halls. And yet one felt that the Art Angel might have wisely withdrawn into his Heaven while the Nursling was in the safe-keeping of Special Johnny.

She had been minding the elder Lizzie's baby for a penny this afternoon, and during the whole of that fierce dialogue had held it clasped tenderly in her thin arms against her narrow childish bosom, and hushed its bitter weeping with frequent pseudo-maternal caresses. The elder Lizzie was exceptionally busy. It was her turn in the wash-house, and from time to time I caught a glimpse of her worried figure flitting through the yard, often loaded with the eccentric fuel of rotten boots and miscellaneous débris with which she kept the copper at boiling-point, and filled the air of Guttergarten with suffocating odours. A thunder-storm was riding up over the darkened sky. There had always been trouble in the air when the elder Lizzie washed. It was,

indeed, a part of the tragedy of her life that she never had a day for drying. She was talking about it even now, in that saddened and yet aggressive voice which had so often and so insistently told us the weary story of a Gutter-mother's grief.

There was much matter for gossip to-day, too. It was holiday time and there had been quite a small commotion round the Gutter Castle over the removal of Teddy to the Fever Hospital. Teddy had not behaved very well himself, and there had been some difficulty in persuading him to go quietly.

He did n't feel the fever, and the sore throat, he told us, would not be near so bad if he could stay at home. Blanchie's heart had been wrung by the scene, and for many days after she clung to the painfully exciting memory of it, and hugged her woe as only a Gutter-woman-baby can.

But at the time she had been able to comfort the afflicted Teddy upon his outward-bound journey. She had raced up the street after the departing hero, and screamed into his hungering ears the last cheering message

of the Gutter, — "They sends yer 'ome ter peel now!"

And even at this moment Johnny was being told, out there in the Gutter Castle playground, that he was not near such a fine fellow as Teddy. And somewhere in a little white bed in a big ward, a red-eyed homesick young exile was weeping bitterly for the Yesterday of a Gutter-baby's life.

And yet another voice, the voice which had called "Rabbits, cheap and beautiful rabbits, from a shillin'!" through Guttergarten for many a year was silenced to-day. Old Hawkins had set out from the Gutter Castle this morning, with his white head bent a little lower than usual, perhaps, and without the usual invitation to us concerning his rabbits.

"I can't py no rent wot I ain't got!" he told the two Lizzies; and the rest of his sorrows had been crushed out under the motor 'bus where he had forced a refuge for himself, and a way out of Guttergarten.

But was that all?

This morning as the Gutter Parson came

back this way from Mass, a swarm of Gutter-babies hailed the appearance of his tall black figure amongst them with ecstasy. The long string of the laundry girls called merrily to him over their pert shoulders, "Mornin', Uncle!" Johnny wheeled his wooden box-cart over his toes without any apologies, and Blanchie was clinging to his hand in precocious flirtation.

Yet it was here, in the very heart of us, that the Gutter Parson was really most himself. He stood there amongst us, in every thought and fibre of his Self-life so infinitely removed from the earth-bound game of Guttergarten as it rolled below his feet. We were crude and vulgar and primitive, we were stubborn and strangely disobedient children; we hugged the Anti-Christ in the immoral secret of our homes, and our playground was the haunt of devils; and yet he knew that, Pagans as we were, within the sympathy and influence of his consecrated personality, we were really his to charm, his to be called out one by one, and acknowledged individually, as our human need of him arose.

He might of course have chosen a very different career. And yet I do not believe, in spite of our singular want of recognition, that his deepest gifts were really ever wasted here, or thrown away upon the children of the Gutter, as they played with their mud-pies far below the shadow of his lofty ideals. We should have missed something if he had been less of a Visionary. We should most certainly have known if he had been a little less of a Man.

And this morning, as he played a little while in the sunshine of Guttergarten, out of the Gutter Castle had come to him suddenly, with his ashen face covered in trembling hands, a dreadful Child of the Gutter with a shadow on his brow.

It was the boy-husband who had occupied the next-door flat to the Lizzies. He had had a small disturbance with his wife the night before, and he had only given her one under the chin to go on with, for cheeking him about his slack work. He had never been able to stop her jaw when she once started, but this time she did not answer back. She would

never answer back any more. And yet he knew that white and ghastly head that he had silenced would chatter to him in his prison cell, would mouth and grimace at him in the supreme moment of disgrace, and go down laughing with him into hell itself.

They fetched him away in the afternoon and he made only a very poor fight of it. In a corner of the deserted home which had been so abruptly broken up a baby cried for him. In the street Guttergarten booed and spat its contempt after him. But the murderer's hand still tingled with a friendly grip and he knew that the Gutter Parson would come to him. All this had happened and yet the elder Lizzie was still fully occupied in her own narrow Self-being, and its small and confined activities. She was still able to concentrate all the energies of her petty domesticated intellect upon that threatening storm as it hovered in ill-omened menace over her day's labour.

It was not the fault, but the great misfortune, indeed, it was the whole tragedy of the

elder Lizzie, that Guttergarten was a desert that would not blossom for her.

The thunder was driving Blanchie in to tea, and I could see that she was intending to offer hospitality to the baby and to Johnny also.

"Come in!" I could hear her saying, "and we'll play mothers and fathers with the baby!"

We had tea, and Blanchie presided over the feast, cutting huge slices for Johnny and nursing the elder Lizzie's baby. Afterwards they carried out their plan, and played fathers and mothers in a little furnished room which they made for themselves under the table. Blanchie washed pocket-handkerchiefs and the baby cried a good deal, and Johnny went out to look for work and came back again without any luck.

"We'll 'ave a row next!" suggested Blanchie. "Miss, 'old the Byby; we're goin' to 'ave a lovely row!"

They had their row. Johnny went under the table and began to break up the home, flinging bits of the furniture out of the little

windows, which had been carefully arranged in brown paper, and tastefully decorated with muslin curtains by Blanchie's domesticated genius. Johnny's language, while he faithfully executed his part of the play, was too realistic to be recorded here.

Meanwhile Blanchie walked up and down outside wringing her hands.

"Oh, Johnny, do be quiet," she wailed; "oh, just 'ark to 'im! There won't be a stick left!"

In the middle of the tragic scene the elder Lizzie arrived and demanded her baby.

"We can't play fathers and mothers without a baby," said Blanchie. "Can't yer leave 'im a bit longer? I won't charge yer nothink hextra!"

It was just what one might have expected of Lizzie, that she should not understand in the least why they could not go on with their "bleedin' nonsense without her baby."

No wonder that the elder Lizzie had never been a happy woman. I began dimly to guess at the secret tragedy of that lonely heart. Blanchie was inclined to take the abrupt

interference in her domestic play quite seriously, but Johnny was ready with other suggestions.

"Never mind! Let's 'ave a trunk murder," he ventured.

"And I'll be the little 'ound wot smelled out yer corpse!"

As I left them so, — fully absorbed in the intense seriousness of their play, — I found myself wondering sadly how long it would be before they, too, would lose, in the deadening reality of Gutter domesticity, the capacity to think and care.

CHAPTER XIX

The Open Door in Guttergarten

MANNERS maketh the Gutter-baby.

Rags will not do it for us, nor can a long abstinence from soap and water effect the miracle. It is altogether a matter of habit and imitative cultivation in the Inner Way. But we cannot deny that the Gutter-dwellers have their own peculiar conception of etiquette. Even in such simple commonplace details as the knocking at a door, or the placing of a chair for a caller, or the handling of a knife, or the helping one's self to sugar, or the blowing of a nose, it is quite easy for the foreigner to give himself away badly. In such an event the courteous Gutter-babies will condemn your hideous blunder with one big stare of amazement and then hurriedly cover up your confusion, feeling in their warm and charitable little hearts only a great pity for such appalling ignorance. It

is fortunate that amongst one's acquaintance there are a few intimates, such as Johnny or Blanchie, who will take one aside after the catastrophe and tenderly explain the grossness of the error.

"That *was* rude, Miss, but of course we knows yer can't 'elp it, — in course we don't expect yer to know heverything!"

Some of the Gutter-dwellers are, of course, much more fastidious in their appreciation of society than others.

Even in Guttergarten there is a Bohemian Set, who take infinite pleasure in capriciously thwarting every anciently established convention which contributes to the personal comfort and convenience of their respectable neighbours.

The advertisement of this attitude of mind is the Open Door.

The Twin's Mother, for instance, would always have carefully shut her front door. Mine is kept open, in spite of the protestations of Blanchie, on strict principle, because I cannot lie to the Gutter-dwellers, and I will not pretend to be what every Gutter-baby in

the neighbourhood knows I am not. How could I, who am for ever making mistakes and doing the impossible, pose as respectable or good form in Guttergarten? But nevertheless I have a great admiration for the Twins' Mother; if I were more like her I know I should be a better woman, even if it made Blanchie feel naughty. And I would not knock on her door twice, as if she did not occupy the whole of the house herself, if I could only remember.

But that is just it. To be the real thing in Guttergarten and to be fit to associate upon equal terms with the Best People, it is quite necessary to have been reared and educated in the school of the Gutter. How can anyone possibly remember all the things I have to? It can only be done if the Gutter-ritual is branded upon one's life and habits, until it has become part of one's very nature.

But what is the real intention behind the idea of the Open Door?

It is, without doubt, a defiance of that strange, spurious growth of human reserve, which is the root of all modern respectability.

Primitive nature has in its foolishness nothing to conceal. Shame is an empty word and repression an untested faculty. Here is no introspection or self-observation, and therefore the Open Door is a perfectly genuine invitation to the "nosey" to come and see, where there is nothing that may be seen, — to come and acquire knowledge, where there is no experience. For behind the Open Door, to the dwellers there, is an atmosphere of unfathomable mystery. And if you make any attempt to open the eyes of a blind Gutterbaby he will always tell you that he can see "nothink at all in it all!" It was late in the story of the evolution of Man that there was born the desire to hide and seek and the sudden terror of the Foe, which is Scandal.

The first hermit, perhaps, was not quite a success, as history almost suggests, but the Man who comes to the front in Guttergarten is the man who keeps "'isself to 'isself."

It is the supreme desire to rise above the sordid common things of Home Sweet Home, which, though still essential to us, have lately become ugly. It is an effort to conceal the

petty appetites, the small economies, and the curling-pins of life.

Johnny and I do not wear curling-pins, but if we did I am sure we should do so quite carelessly. The two Lizzies generally appear in them on week-days, and Blanchie always gets special permission to go to school in crackers, when there is a concert in the evening.

Some day it will not be good form to eat in public. Then I suppose we shall not be allowed to suck oranges in the Pit and the door will be closed on dinner-parties.

But it is really quite a nuisance to be so tiresomely fastidious as some of the Gutter-dwellers have become.

Through the Open Door, and straight on into our little scullery, as Blanchie and I were washing-up after a tea-fight, came a lean, shabby figure with unsteady progress.

"I wished to speak to yer about me night's lodging, Ma'am!" it said.

I left the washing-up to Blanchie, who protested vehemently at the injustice, and retired into my study with the lean woman.

It was a long story without any particular

information and an utterly discreet omittance of facts, to which I listened while the lean tramp had her supper and added to Blanchie's domestic troubles in the scullery.

In the middle of it Blanchie stuck a flushed and indignant face round the door.

"It's ten of 'em, Miss," she said warningly, "and I ain't goin' ter bed till this business is settled!"

But the difficulty was, how were we to dispose of the lean tramp? She had tried the common lodging-houses in the neighbourhood and found them so unladylike; the Free Shelter was not for her, she being a very little over the age limit as she had told us, with the suggestion of a blush; and the Casual Ward would not free its refugees until Tuesday morning, and that meant that the lean tramp would have to do a day's work on Monday, in exchange for hospitality. She was n't used to rough work and they "treated yer like cattle in there."

It was, indeed, a problem, and Blanchie refused to entertain the idea of putting her up for the night. Why, she might be a mur-

derer! Perhaps we might be able to find a new and unexplored lodging-house, so we wandered out into Guttergarten full of our quest.

It was ten o'clock and Saturday, the Gutter-market was alive and in full swing, as we pushed our way along. My companion seemed far less keenly interested than I was, and followed hesitatingly after me; I was, indeed, more than once seriously afraid of losing her.

"Come on," I called to her across the bobbing crowd. "It's getting late, we shan't get in anywhere!"

I heard her whining dismally behind me, "There's no place in the world for such as I; thank Gawd, there's a roof in 'eaven. I wonder I ain't a corpse, the way I'm treated, — I say, I wonder I ain't a corpse!"

"Cheer up," I said, with some irritation; for I felt that I was doing a great deal for this lean and unknown stranger.

"I'm used to 'avin' my word trusted!" she said bitterly. "People always b'lieves me!"

"Oh, they don't believe me," said I reas-

suringly; "I have to give references to prove what I say!"

I knew that I had shocked the lean tramp, but now we had reached a lodging-house, and stood in the little office interviewing the deputy.

"Could you give my friend a night's lodging?" I enquired politely.

"I could if she's payin'; I don't care for the looks of 'er meself!"

"Oh, but she's quite respectable!" I assured the deputy. "In fact she's really rather strange in the kitchen amongst the other women, but you'll make her at home, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss," said the deputy, still a little doubtfully; but at this point the lean tramp interfered.

"Stop, Miss; this was the place where I come last Saturday week, and there was n't no towel after me wash-up!"

"There are three towels down there," declared the deputy reprovingly.

"I could n't stop 'ere no'ow!" said the lean one, and we moved on.

"Perhaps we had better try the Free Shelter," I suggested.

There the door was abruptly shut in our faces.

"There's manners!" said the lean one bitterly; "I say, I wonders I ain't a corpse; I'm too nice for this world; I can't stand sich ways!"

I left her discreetly hiding round the corner, and returned alone to the attack upon the Free Shelter. This time I got admittance, and within, I heard the story of the lean person which she had failed to tell me herself. As I passed her, still lurking in the shadows, she muttered:

"The 'ole evenin' I've wasted skirmishin' about after you; wish I'd never met you! You're not used to ladies, you ain't!"

"The Casual Ward's your best place," I answered, as I hastened nervously away in the direction of Home and an irate Blanchie. "Good night!"

Blanchie greeted me with dignity, but immense relief.

"Yer fair frit me, Miss, stoppin' out

like this, and yer ain't very wise if yer can't see through a swindlin' murderer like that."

The next day the Gutter Parson came to ask if I had been able to do anything for the nice woman he had sent me.

"She ought to be pole-axed, she ought," cried Blanchie from the scullery.

"Ah!" said the Gutter Parson sadly; "it is very seldom that one can do anything for respectable people!"

At any rate, it would seem as though Heaven did not begin for the respectable people in their Gutter-life.

But if it is difficult for us to live up to the curious ritual of Gutter-decency it is also a wretchedly poor representation of courtesy that we in our turn offer them through the official channel. My observations have been made among the Gutter-dwellers, living very much as they do, on quite as limited an income, and I have seen in my experience very little oppression or injustice to them, but I have seen a great deal of unnecessary discourtesy and lack of sympathy. In the dis-

pensary waiting-room, in the philanthropic office, and even in their own poor little homes, for which they are forced to pay absurdly high rents, I have watched them hustled and worried and driven like obstinate cattle, before they have had the chance to prove that they are not going to be any trouble to anybody.

No one can know the harm that a Sister of Charity with bad manners, or a district nurse with a harsh voice, or a door shut sharply in a tipsy face, or even a Gutter Parson who misses a friendly greeting in the street, because he is thinking deeply of something else, can do. Below the brusque and unmannerly officialism, the heart of the State is profoundly considerate for her poorer children, but the Gutter-dwellers do not see this. They only know that they must prepare for insult and offence if they apply for parish relief. They know that they must expect to pay, for what is so generously done for them, by injured pride and wounded dignity at the hands of petty officials, who are paid for their work, and cannot be civil over it.

In every department of life now, the best of everything is done for our poor, but it is often done unkindly. And that is why the wives are generally sent on errands of this nature, and when possible the Gutter-babies. I have met Johnny running back from the parish doctor, with a huge bottle of medicine under his arm, but with streaming eyes —

"My mother ain't no bad woman; her's been a good mother to me!"

It is, of course, very necessary to deny most of the requests of the Gutter-dwellers, who are by no means always quite reasonable in their demands; but those who come among us to find their vocation in the great garden of the Gutter should be warned that the bruised hearts they are ready to storm so roughly are raw and quivering with sensitive pride, and often breaking with despair.

Many of the bold missionary spirits who come to us with brave words, and ask to be let loose among the very poor, are disgusted and appalled when they find themselves among human swine in a sewer of filth and indecency beyond their crudest dreams.

And yet there is not a Gutter-baby to be found anywhere whose little heart is cold, and the wilds of Guttergarten can be conquered with a smile.

CHAPTER XX

The Time to Hop

SOME people only recognise four seasons: spring, when one entertains a strange idea that presently the sun will shine; summer, when scepticism ripens into honest doubt; autumn, when even the leaves get sick of hope deferred, and climb down one by one from their watch-towers in the windy trees; and dear old winter, when one gives it all up and draws round the blazing hearth and is really warm at last. But this is only a narrow view of the year: there are many times and many seasons, and here in the Gutter we have our own. There is the season at the beginning of the quarter when the pensions are paid — that is the time of thirst and elation; and the week that comes after Bank Holiday and its happy memories — this is the time of famine and depression.

But of all the rolling seasons not one is so full of incident as the time to Hop. It comes

towards the end of the out-of-town season, when the smart ladies lay aside the latest thing in bathing-costumes, and say to each other over the tea-cups, — "Of course you are going North!"

It comes when the clerks and the patient junior partners in solitary state have ceased to wonder "Where do I come in?" and have been borne away to departure platforms by long caravans of weak-kneed horses crawling snail-like under the shells of modest pilgrim baskets; when the school-boy lays aside his cricket-bat, and neglects camera and bicycle to glance at his holiday task the day before term; when in rural choirs rows of neat but voiceless choristers stumble prematurely through their harvest anthems before all the wealth has been gathered into London garners. Then across the city, gaining force from every forbidden slum and impenetrable alley, sweeps a vast army bearing all before it. Dim memories of Paris rebellion and mutinous Sepoys dance menacingly before the brain till suddenly the truth flashes upon one that the time of hopping is now. There are

men, women, and tiny children, for the youngest can find a vocation among the hops, and I have known a veteran of seven return from his third season with many noble wounds of obstinate branches on bare weather-beaten legs and scarred sunburnt hands. With them also is the Priest, who has left his own vineyard for Israel *in exitu*, and the Salvationist, who will camp out alongside with drum and chant. Happy hoppers! What a whirl of animation and excitement must rush with them into village street and country lane! Yet it will not be all playtime. The hoppers' day begins early, and hands and feet are weary and backs breaking under cruel burdens before the sun goes down red and still behind the strange hills. Then the evening picnic commences, mugs clink cheerily, and shrill hungry voices clamour for "pieces." Gradually the silence deepens over the deserted fields, and the stars smile down on the crowded tents, where hundreds of tired hoppers, children of the great city that never sleeps, lie in dreamless exhaustion. Sometimes the clouds gather into dark storms

that break in heavy autumn rains and deluge the camp. Sometimes, too, through the overpacked tents, pestilence stalks and claims her own and there are gaps in the merry, noisy ranks that march homewards in late September.

But what of those who are left behind?

We wander through lonely streets that memory paints so full of life. Thin streams of little playmates straggle obediently to the peremptory summons of the nine o'clock bell, with scarcely enough competition to prompt the customary "Am oi lite?" For rows of barred doors and boarded windows defy even the school officials.

Where are the laundry girls with their harsh laughter and bright faces? The hum and stir of the "Eyelet factory" is hushed. Tethered to a lamp-post, the coster's donkey grazes peacefully in the Gutter. The familiar organ no longer winds its weary tune to inspire the artless grace of tiny dancers. The city suddenly becomes a prison grey and grim, and one's heart is with the hoppers. For it is not London we love, but those who weave the

phantasy for us. This train of thought is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a diminutive friend, with an enormous smile of welcome illuminating a dusky face, of which even the dirtiness just now adds to the attraction.

"So you have n't gone hopping, my Johnny!" How glad one is! The Friend trots contentedly beside, and the enemy of Desolation spreads its wings.

"Naow, not this time; Mar ses I jes' better — that's all!"

I knew what awful suggestions the Friend meant to convey of maternal wrath, and wondered what calamity had embittered that lady's views.

"Had Daddy got 'nicked'?"

"Naow, not fer more'n er month!"

"Was little Markie sick again?"

"Naow, 'e cut 'is 'and orf in the mangle, but it growed ag'in."

"Was there a new baby?"

"Naow, we ain't goin' ter buy no more of 'em, we're savin' fer er guse at Christmas!"

Then I had really no more ideas, and the Friend must end my suspense.

"Mar ses it's low ter 'op, yer see," he added in a hoarse whisper; "yer goes 'oppin, 'ow does yer cum back?"

I did not know at all.

"Woi, yer cums back jumpin'!"

I felt quite certain it was more select to be alone in London. But just then the stoicism of the Friend collapsed; he shoved two grimy knuckles into his wide black eyes and choked.

" I does wish I was ther, not 'arf!"

So we waived the etiquette of our social superiority, the Friend and I, and hugged each other in our desertion — and talked of the pleasures of hopping till our legs ached, but our hearts danced on.

We pictured the welcome return of the absent ones, when slum and alley would echo with the shout — "The hoppers are coming — hurrah!"

What hand-grips and songs and din of revelry — but my Johnny, standing just a little aloof, would forget what happened just now, and, looking very superior, would point

a derisive thumb, and say, as only he can, — "Garn!"

We grew quite cheerful over this mental picture and the Friend said farewell in joyful anticipation.

"I can't stop 'ere gossopin'!" he said, suddenly alive to domestic cares; "I mus' fetch the ole lydy 'ome, she'll be 'arf drownded!"

He swung through the doors of the opposite "Pub" into the glaring light of the bar, returning a moment later with big eyes of awed concern.

"'Er's gawn, 'er ain't ther; O lor, wot 'as 'appened? I mus' slope!"

He bustled off, jerking with newly installed self-importance, and the shadow of an ominous cloud closed over the dear figure of my Johnny. He will be equal to it, whatever it is, and will face it with the dogged patience of his class. But the most attractive characteristic of the precocious Gutter-baby is the way in which he suddenly flings aside his independence and has to be cuddled back into manliness. We all have our moments of weakness.

CHAPTER XXI

The Game in Guttergarten

THE great game of the sexes that has through so many generations kept the worlds rolling on in eccentric progress can nowhere else be observed in its crude and primitive force as in Guttergarten. Here among the Gutter-dwellers we know how to play at the game with a zest and excitement that surpasses shame and self-consciousness and all pretence and disguise. Perhaps it is because we are not all busy scrambling after another toy or slapping in the air at something, because so few of us have flannel shirts or running-shoes, that we are in such deadly earnest about the great world-ball and the simple old rule of the eternal game. The sacred game that is our heritage snatched from the Fall, the game that the gods gave to us, before the Pythian festivities were thought of, before the Dioscuri were conceived, is played hard among the Gutter-

dwellers, and is played to the finish; and the goal is the enthronement of tyrannic fitness and the suppression of all that is weak and effete. We do not gloss it over with a thin varnish of insincere gallantry. And we do not dress it up in the pseudo-science of modern mysticism. It is to us still the simple "Game of Life."

"See if I can't get off to-night!" confides the little Gutter-maid to her own reflection in the looking-glass, as she frizzles up an obstinate curl, and digs the last pin into her "Exhibition hat."

All day long in the laundry, or the factory, or the kitchen of some cheap lodging-house, her little human body has worked out its vitality with the desperate energy of struggling independence. But the hour of freedom has come to her at last, and now her brain is waking to fresh activities. The real business of life is to be entered upon now, and the little Gutter-maid trips off in her cheap finery to find her vocation in the eternal game.

It is the hour when the game is in full swing. At every corner of the street the girl and boy

are meeting. They are lounging about the sweet-shops and cuddling each other on the top of every 'bus that rattles by; they are waiting arm-in-arm outside the public places of amusement, and wasting their pinched savings and sweated wages in generous extravagance upon each other. We have surely dropped into a Gutter-Eden, and the mad world is in love again.

Of course there are signs here as elsewhere that the old game will one day be played out. Here and there a few individuals are dropping out of their places in it. Some of them tired of the tossing of hearts and interaction of sympathies and some of them badly wounded in the battle of affections. Others have been warned off the perilous playground. "Think I'm goin' to make a fool of meself! I've seen enough of that at 'ome, you can take my dyin' oath on it." Yet one of the perpetual problems of Guttergarten is the selflessness and abandonment with which the young things in their turn fling away the frolic of their wild free lives in the interests of the game.

Nor do the parents of these willing victims make many attempt at all to interfere with this wholesale sacrifice. The elder Lizzie, with all the weight of woe and care, the squalor and misery that her venture in the game has brought upon her, will, I have no doubt whatever, smile as sweetly as upon her own wedding morn when Lizzie junior, in a few months, goes out into the world with the evil-looking impecunious youth on the ground-floor of the Gutter Castle, who has scarcely done two days' honest work in his life, and will certainly never do another when he has someone else to keep him. We have only the old explanation of it. One of the partners in the game must invariably be stricken with blindness. But, after all, what does the game mean to any of us? And if we could stop in our play for a minute, how should we account for our behaviour at all?

"We does it for an 'ome, Miss," Lizzie explained upon one occasion, when I had reasoned with her at some length upon the exceedingly imprudent future which she had planned so bravely for herself. "If I 'ad er

nice little place like this, Miss, I should n't 'ave no call to git no chap for meself, but wot 'ave such as me ter look to, if we don't make a 'ome, Miss?"

Lizzie, of course, will have it her own way, and presently when the strict conditions of the laundry temporarily deprive her of her livelihood for several months, the sufferings of the little family will be relieved by the gradual disappearance of the home. And by the time that Lizzie's baby is old enough to be left to wail for her while she returns to work, there will begin the laborious task of making a new home all over again. And yet Lizzie is entirely responsible for the miserable cycle of such a career. Her Sammy had to be very carefully courted and walked out before she was really quite sure of her little home. "Ain't 'e a flash feller?" the girls used to whisper admiringly over coyly tilted shoulders, and Lizzie was always ready to answer with grateful pride, "Ain't 'e ever so!"

The affair, of course, was entirely practical, and had nothing at all to do with the uncertain and changeful traffic of human hearts.

As the time came round for Lizzie's annual holiday, and we planned it out as usual together, I asked if perhaps her Sammy might not be invited to run down and see her for a day.

Lizzie was full of consternation at the suggestion. "Gawd! no, Miss," she interrupted hurriedly; "I wants it to be a 'oliday this time. I gets enough of 'e at 'ome."

"Well, but I thought you might be dull."

"Me dull?" said Lizzie cheerfully; "I b'lieve yer; why, I'll get orf all right; don't you fret yer skin. Sammy, 'e says to me, 'Liz,' 'e says, 'yer'll 'ave to keep yer glove on that 'and.'"

"Do you love him, Lizzie?" I once asked in an inquisitive moment.

"Love 'e, did yer say it? What, me love Sammy? Oh, my Gawd!" and Lizzie subsided into helpless giggles.

"Oh, save us!" she remarked presently, as her normal self-control was gradually restored to her; "I don't know about love; me and Sammy don't waste our time goin' in for love. But 'e's all right you know, Miss. Only we

can't agree. I don't know 'ow 't is, but there 't is, we can't agree. I'm sure, Miss, 'is evenin' out it's fair mis'ry to me."

Oh, the mysterious subtlety of the sacred game!

And it is curious to think how the whole of this intricate Gutter-life, with its thousands of little homes, its countless Sammys, and still more numerous shrewd and callous Lizzies, with all its varied industries and multiform contrivances, with all its poverty and needless sorrow, is really due to the caprice and mischief of the one woman who loves one man, and the one man who wants many women.

I do not know that Lizzie ever really found it any easier to agree with her self-selected partner. Her home life was punctuated by sudden storms and hideous rows. She got him three months once, and several times sought the protection of the law against him. She summoned him for black eyes and she cut him off his pocket-money from time to time, but in the end she always forgave him. He was hers, and she would do her best for

We can't agree

him and keep him as nice as she could, until death should mercifully intervene, and part them at last. And then she would be a widow and widows have many privileges in Guttergarten. She would be able to live substantially on charity, and wear "deeps," and pose as one of the bereaved army among the Gutterdwellers. Her stormy past would be lost in oblivion, and no one would remember how often in the home of Lizzie there were words. For in Guttergarten we bury our dead, and talk only of the funeral.

Once I asked Lizzie how people managed the tremendous business of "getting off."

"Gawd, Miss, you are a comic!" said Lizzie. "Some girls 'as different ways to others, Miss; it's a secret, Miss; there's some as can, and some as can't."

But after a little more persuasion Lizzie consented to tell me about her first experience in the game.

"I was waitin' for a 'bus and watchin' some feller, when up 'e comes. ''Scuse me,' says 'e, 'but I think as I knows you, Miss.' 'Ho, no,' says I; 'then you don't.' 'Where do you

live?' says 'e. 'Shepherd's Bush,' says I. 'Whereabouts?' says 'e. 'Well, I don't know as I cares to tell you that,' says I, 'you got enough to go on with.' And 'e ups on the 'bus, and pays me fare 'ome and all. When I gets down, 'e says, 'I'll meet yer same place termorrer.' 'Well,' says I, 'and if yer do, 'ow shall I know yer?' 'Why, I'll 'ave a straw 'at on,' says 'e. But when I gets there all the fellers 'ad straw 'ats on."

Lizzie chuckled cunningly over the lost innocence of her first "go off," and then hastened to apologise profusely. "Gawd, Miss, there's a dirty laugh," she said.

But Lizzie was not quite orthodox always in her methods, and in the matter of Sammy's cultivation she did not play fair at all, according to the etiquette of the absurd game. Sammy's pretty little sister Topsy had once been Lizzie's dearest pal. There was nothing within those two little feminine hearts which was not generously shared by each. They worked side by side, and they went out and returned together. They took the same money, and they squandered it in exactly the

same ways, and even their Sunday hats and their holiday dresses were counterparts of each other. And so the two little women, grinding away together, formed their characters carelessly upon the same easily reached model. But in the end the shock of action in the game shaped the destiny of each. It is forbidden in Guttergarten even to notice the existence of the brother of a pal, and Lizzie did this thing. She accepted the generous hospitality of Topsy's invitations, and at the same time she turned her eyes in the direction of Sammy. There was an abrupt termination to the long sweet friendship of the two girls. They met and did not speak; they kept up a jealous war in the home of Topsy's mother, where Lizzie must still be a frequent guest. No friendly interference could heal that infamous wound, inflicted upon Topsy's heart by the familiar hand of a pal. It was not until long afterwards, in the doubtful atmosphere of Lizzie's new home, when a little beetroot-coloured scrap of screaming humanity was placed in Topsy's empty arms, that the quarrel was made up, and she answered

the invitation to be "gawdmother" by kissing the white face on the pillow.

In the end we all give the same account of ourselves, and the Gutter-baby is still the excuse for the game.

CHAPTER XXII

The Prisoner of Guttergarten

GUTTERGARTEN is quite as difficult to locate as the ancient garden of the world's myth. It is not convenient to draw a line round the beloved kingdom, or in any way possible to define accurately the wide boundaries of the Gutter-dwellers' rapidly propagating colonies. We cannot set our faces deliberately in any particular direction to seek Guttergarten. Perhaps naturally in such a quest our hearts would fly eastward into the golden home of promise and romance, but even then the Guttergarten of the west would lie behind us, rich in abundant treasure, and with its wealth of harvest store. For it is impossible to persevere very long upon any given line of progress without tumbling presently headlong into Guttergarten, and it is as profoundly true of Guttergarten, as of any other divinely appropriated country, that the sun never sets upon the home of the Gutter-dwellers.

But in spite of this, the captive of Guttergarten is an intensely real and substantial person, fretting bitterly within the prison-house of human experience, and dreaming only in restless delight of the land of liberty and the song of the free. There is a prohibition and a limit even in Guttergarten. Every day the Gutter-babies are rushing in ecstatic haste towards the farthest borderland. They know that infinity is not theirs, that they are the slaves of the delusive creatures, time and space and matter. The wild glad vision of a Gutter-baby's eyes is beyond the emptiness of human reach, somewhere safe among the real things, perhaps behind the glittering stars and the white circle of the silent moon. But their little lives must run out in experience to the very edge of fact. They must sound the depths and explore the dimensions before they settle down into the heart of Guttergarten to divine discontent or the tears of satisfaction.

The little Gutter-babies of the Sunday School were going out two hundred strong for their annual summer tea-picnic in the

cricket-field two miles out of Guttergarten. "All the nice gals love a sailor," they sang as they marched cheerfully along, with the afternoon sun in their eyes and the dust of Guttergarten rising before them. Some of them were crying, for to leave Guttergarten for a few hours even is a grievous thing. Nobody had any idea what might be happening while they were away. There might be a big lock-up, or a fight, or a fire in the Gutter Castle. Besides, everybody's mother was in Guttergarten, and even Gutter-babies miss their mothers. But most of them were bent on pleasure, and on the whole it was a merry little company that followed the Gutter Parson out of Guttergarten along the dusty roads, and the music of their happy little voices brought many a Gutter-mother to her window, full of maternal pride and boastful interest.

"There's my little Bertie!"

"'Ere comes my boy; don't 'e look all right? You would n't think I made them little breeches out of 'is Daddy's coat, would you?"

There were a few quarrels on the road, of

course. Gutter-babies cannot be expected to walk all the way out of Guttergarten without quarrelling with each other.

From the remote end of the irregular and straggling little cavalcade a pleading voice was calling "Teacher!" shrill and persistently and a small hand was waggling in the air to attract attention.

There is not much time or opportunity for personal matters with the Gutter-babies, or serious consideration of the problems of individuality during a march. There are so many dangers *en route*, so many little wild spirits to control and so many orders to put into action. The leaders have to be told not to run so fast, and the rear has to be told not to drag so much, and the middle contingent has to be told not to bulge all the way across the road. Then there are so many other little details to attend to. One Gutter-baby wants his sash tied up, and someone else has trodden all the way up it before anything can be done for him. "Me mother bought it this mornin'. 'Er won't 'arf give me a 'idin' when I gets 'ome!"

"Well, yer can't spex to be out all day without gettin' a 'idin' after it," says Special Johnny scornfully. "Don't yer know that not an afternoon passes without yer 'as a sin on yer soul?"

Then there are Gutter-babies who have to be carried because they are not used to walking. "Me mother says I can't walk so far 'cos she don't 'old with givin' me the streets."

And then there are the others, the very worst Gutter-babies of all, who trip over the kerb-stones and cut their knees. Oh, what a noise they make, and how tenderly one has to nurse the wounded limb while the other little travellers are toiling on and gradually disappearing in the distance, quickly hidden from sight in the cloud of dust kicked up by the march of many little swinging feet. Then there is the sudden recovery, and the breathless run to overtake them with the Gutter-baby that was left behind clinging to Teacher's skirts.

And all the while at the end of that moving line, the little appealing hand is wriggling quietly backwards and forwards in the air.

"Please, Julie Jones, she says she don't like my 'at, Teacher!" A message has to be sent all the way up the line until the offender, Julie Jones, has been discovered and brought unwillingly to judgment. "I never!" says the unblushing Julie; "leastways only once I did, but Rosie Smith says to me, 'I'd rather wear a man's bowler 'at, Teacher.'"

Then Rosie Smith must be interviewed. "Please, Teacher, I was nearly there," cries Rosie, whose eyes had already sighted the promised land of the cricket-field.

"But I hear you have been very rude, Rosie. I am very surprised that you object to this little girl's hat."

Rosie's eyes are growing round and blue, for we are getting on to her favourite subject — the dressing-up and the arraying of the outer little Gutter-baby.

"Please, Teacher, I've got two silk dresses at 'ome."

But at last we have reached the end of the journey. Soon, the long and toilsome march will be quite forgotten, and already the perils of the road are over, for the two hun-

dred little Gutter-babies are filing through the open gate of the promised land into the green and sunny pastures of the unknown. Even the guardian angels of these little wild people must have been glad to drop exhausted for a few minutes' respite from anxiety, after the strain of that colossal enterprise which we had thrust upon them. For under no mere human escort can two hundred Gutter-babies be separated from Guttergarten and their mothers without awful disaster.

There is a wide and sunlit spread of green field before us, with a delightful little range of hills on one side for Gutter-babies to run up and down, and a deeply riven ditch, with a board thrown across it invitingly. There is also a wild enemy in possession in the shape of a big horse grazing quietly in the distance. But all these local interests scarcely attract the wondering attention of a single Gutter-baby yet. What has happened to the little wild people?

They are all hurrying as fast as possible to the very farthest boundary of this new play-ground. They are seeking out the limit of

their new situation. For they know that they are not really in the Gutter-babies' Heaven. They have walked all the way out of Gutter-garten and found a new country, but they have brought with them the atmosphere of the home of the Gutter-dwellers. All round them the green things of the earth are calling to their little singing hearts, but they know that, in spite of the sunshine and the soft tender grass and the fresh summer wind and the bright sky, they are still in prison. Beyond the tufted ridge of brown hedge and on the other side of the yawning ditch is the land of liberty — the kingdom of the free. And they cannot rest in their prison until they have toured solemnly round the whole circle of limitation and assured themselves that there is no possibility of escape. Presently they will come back to us full of play and enthusiasm, to spend the rest of the afternoon making the best of their captivity, with the struggling desire of a Gutter-baby's heart pleading still through the laughter of wide, observant eyes. Even those eccentric games with which they so successfully entertain each

other illustrate the dominant idea in the little players' minds.

"Sally go round the sun,
Sally go round the moon,
Sally go round the chimney-pot,
On a Sunday afternoon. Ho!"

At the last note of the song every Gutter-baby has thrown one foot into the air, as if to follow the precarious flight of Sally in her three magnificent ventures beyond the limit of a Gutter-baby's experience, into that kingdom of the heights where the sun and the moon and the chimney-pot hold their court. A sudden flop upon the green grass, and each Gutter-baby has come abruptly back to earth with the wisdom that only failure and the discovery of the limit can teach the prisoner of humanity. There is no way out of Guttergarten.

In a few years, when all these little wild people have grown long in limb and wise in head, and have lost a great many of their dreams and much of their enthusiasm in the ecstatic chase of Sally towards the land of smoke and fire, and have learnt perhaps other

and less elevating ways of spending Sunday afternoons, we shall still find them all safe in the firm, unchanging arms of Guttergarten, training up their own new Gutter-babies in the old prison habits and the rigorous discipline of the eternal limit.

There was a bright little Gutter-baby once, of my acquaintance, who won a scholarship for deep learning in the local school, and was consequently transferred with every honour to a Higher Grade Academy, where his splendid abilities might be encouraged and developed to more advantage.

Day after day, the little fellow trudged, half-fed and with neatly patched garments, to the haunts of civilization and culture. He was the pride and boast of his family circle, who made the most heroic sacrifices to force away from this ambitious and privileged Gutter-baby the threatening line of imprisoning limit. While his father was selling rabbits, "Cheap and boiled!" in the Gutter-market, the hungry little student sat at his desk and stormed the treasure-land of science.

There were lots of things that Willie must

have, which he had never thought of wanting before, that he might not be discredited among his colleagues. But there was one thing he could never have, that marked the line of difference plainly between the scholarship-boy and the children of those other parents who kept big shops beyond the reach of the Gutter-dwellers, and which branded him for ever as the slave of Guttergarten.

"Willie," asked one of the visiting inspectors upon one occasion, "will you tell me why you are the only boy in the school who does not wear a collar?"

Willie was overcome with confusion immediately, but the Gutter-baby knew that at last he had reached the limit.

"Please," he answered bravely, "Father don't like I to wear one. 'E says't ain't right for such as we be." And then the glorious pride of the Gutter-baby in his splendid heritage of captivity came suddenly to the rescue, and he explained boastfully, "We're a coster fam'ly, Sir." No, there is no way out of Guttergarten for any of us.

I am only a stranger and an outsider here,

trained at last by the Gutter-babies' careful education to make fewer mistakes, perhaps, than in the years that have gone, and much improved, without doubt, by the untiring observation of the ways and habits of the Gutter-dwellers, but still only a heathen and a foreigner, whom they have most graciously entertained in their midst. And yet I, too, am the Prisoner of Guttergarten. Sometimes for a little time it seems as if I might drop out of the Gutter-heart into the life of things beyond the limit, where the world is not a garden and the mind of man is not "special." But it cannot be. A thousand eagerly clinging memories are dragging me back into the narrow compass of a Gutter-home. The voices of the Gutter-babies are calling, and at once the greedy beckoning of the far-off vision has lost its charm; the prison walls close round me again, and for ever I am fast in Guttergarten.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Starver

BEHIND the top windows of the Gutter Castle the wreck of the elder Lizzie's little home had begun.

"Oh, my Gordon!" shrieked Johnny suddenly; "'ere, Miss, come and look at this horful show up!"

The elder Lizzie was being unceremoniously dragged out of the "Blue Star," through a gaping and astonished crowd.

"Yer bleedin' Starver!" she defended herself. "You ought to 'ave a wife, you ought. 'Oos money do I treat meself with? 'Oo keeps your 'ome for you? Tell me that, I say, yer bleedin' Starver!"

He did not tell her, but he hit her mouth to stop the flow of abuse and she gave him a black eye.

And that was the beginning of the collapse of the elder Lizzie's patience. For this crisis she had worked so bravely day and night at

the laundry, and dragged the children's earnings from them to keep his home safe, while he hung about Guttergarten with his hands in his pockets and a pipe in his mouth. She had often wondered how he had got the money for his tobacco. It did not come from her — not much!

As she hurried homewards now, with her little ones clinging to her skirt in frightened sympathy, the heart of the elder Lizzie was filled with bitterness and hatred. She sat down in the Grandmother's empty chair, struggling to command her dizzy senses and wiping the blood from her wounded face. He was her man, and she had kept him all these years; she did not turn against him because he had hit her; she liked a man of spirit; but now he had shown he was a man, he should keep himself.

Of course she knew he had a fancy for her not to gossip in the "Blue Star" with Topsy's mother, and he had said if he caught them at it, he would knock their two heads together until he had split every ounce of brain in each of them.

Struggling to command her dizzy senses

It was her being out at tea-time that had done it. A man wants his tea when he comes in, and it ought to be ready for him even if he has only been walking round the houses with his pipe, while Mother has been sweated out at the wash-house all the afternoon. But this was the last of it. He had gone out; when he came back he should have a surprise. She remembered with a mocking smile that it was his birthday on Monday. Well, she did not suppose she would ever remember his birthday again, but this once she would give him another surprise to mark the day. She would send him a summons for his birthday. But there was a great deal to do. It was no time for sitting in the Grandmother's chair and nursing her troubles. The children must help her. She flung up the window and shouted for Teddy.

"Come in at once, yer wicked boy, or I'll knock yer 'ead off; yer won't want to run the streets to-morrow, I s'pose, when yer've got no 'ome!"

And then began the destruction of the elder Lizzie's home. There was not a great

deal of it to break up, much less than there used to be.

It had been a hard winter, very hard, indeed, inside the Gutter Castle. They made you pay your rent there, and if there was no money coming, you had to make it on the home. Most of the bits went to the pawnshop on a borrowed barrow now, and the rest was soon disposed of in other ways.

Johnny and Teddy rather enjoyed the proceedings; every Gutter-baby loves moving-day, and neither of them had the least idea that they were taking part in the tragedy of the elder Lizzie.

At last everything was done. The little home behind the top windows of the Gutter Castle had been utterly devastated. The cold bare rooms, with their blackened ceilings and untidy walls, were forlornly suggestive of desertion. They might have said many things to the wild misery of Lizzie's heart, if she had cared. In that corner she had rocked her first baby and talked of love. Here she had washed and mended and scolded and suffered for the twenty years of her married life.

Storms had swept over the little home she had defended so bravely, but they had passed as suddenly as they came. But now the sun would shine no more there.

This was the tragedy of Lizzie, that she had lost her home. And now she must go before he came back. He would kill her if he found her there, and she must get her summons out first. Down the stairs she came, and the children must not follow.

"I'm goin' away to the seaside," she told them.

She had lied to her own Gutter-babies.

"Could she be a woman?" Johnny sneered, when it was all over.

Lizzie went out from the Gutter Castle, but she did not go far. She must be where she could carry out her poor little vicious plans. She must be, too, where she could see her own little ones crying for bread and running the streets barefoot.

The elder Lizzie must be mad!

She went to a furnished room in the next street and hid herself there. The family of the elder Lizzie did not suffer any serious

privation, after all. Perhaps she had known they would be all right. Topsy's mother took in the little boys and the new baby and Lizzie went to the Free Shelter for a night or two till things came straight again. Billy found a shake-down for himself with a pal, and Teddy persuaded Johnny to befriend him.

Only the Starver sat alone among the shadows in his empty home and wondered what the devil was the matter.

Presently he, too, went out to find his mates in the "Blue Star."

The birthday came and Lizzie got her summons out, but it did not surprise the Starver.

Nobody could find the Starver; he had disappeared; the bare rooms in the top of the Gutter Castle were as empty as when the elder Lizzie had left them. Everybody wanted to know what the devil had become of the Starver. But only the devil knew.

At last someone volunteered to tell Lizzie of the Starver's disappearance. Lizzie was disappointed. After all, her little birthday surprise had been a failure. But she would find him, she would hunt him to the end of

the earth, she would drag the canals and dive into the deep places of Guttergarten for the missing body of the Starver.

But she knew where he was. He had got pinched on Saturday night in his cups, and this time there had been no elder Lizzie to bail him out. But upon investigation Lizzie's theory collapsed. The Starver was not in the lock-up.

The elder Lizzie went on going to the laundry and paying for her furnished room, while other people minded the Starver's children for her, and we all lived breathlessly under the shadow of this tremendous mystery. But at last the end came.

It was the Saturday after the disappearance of the Starver. He had been away a week, when Johnny bounced in in a state of wild excitement.

"I've seed 'im!" he screamed. "I'll take me dyin' oath on it!"

The Starver had come home at last. He carried a bag of tools with him, and he was up there in the Gutter Castle, collecting his scattered family. Lizzie stood out in Gutter-

garten and watched the gathering of the home circle. Could the Starver really have found work? Of course she had never meant to take the matter to court. It was only her little birthday surprise for him. Would he ask her to come back? She wondered! She knew what a lot of washing there must be by this time. Why, his poor socks must be fair walked through, if he had been on tramp. Presently the window flew up, and the Starver looked out. He seemed to look very peeky, she thought, but there! work had never agreed with him.

"Liz," he said, "ain't yer comin' up?"

He must be clean daft to think she would go back to him like that. If he went down on his hands and knees he could n't expect more.

"Tom," she said, "I never meant to take that to court, but you've seen the last of me. Mind you're good to the kids, Tom, when I'm gone, and don't forget to give Nannie 'er cough mixture. Maybe you'll find me in the canal, but there's plenty of chaps 'ud be glad to 'ave me work for 'em as I've worked for you, and the children knows as 'ow I 'ave."

The Starver's face, as it hung out of the window, became troubled.

"Ain't yer comin' up, Liz?' he persisted gently.

"Me comin' up, Tom? — not me. I can't do it no more, Tom; I'm fair broke, I am, Tom. If yer went down on yer bended knees yer could n't ask no more!"

For the whole afternoon it seemed as if this dialogue would continue. But I was not anxious about Lizzie. I knew that curiosity and wounded pride would certainly carry the day, and land her safely once again in the bosom of her abandoned family.

That the Starver should have found work after all these years was an unfathomable mystery; that the Starver should have become independent was the sting of cruelty.

"Ain't yer comin' up, Liz?" went on the gruff voice kindly.

"Wot's 'ome without a mother?" suggested Johnny at her elbow.

"Yer don't want yer wife now yer can keep yerself, I s'pose? 'Ow did yer find work?"

"I ain't found no work, Liz! 'Oo says I got any work?"

"Why, wot you got in yer bloody bag, then? Ain't they tools in there?"

"They ain't no tools, Liz. I've been down in the country, along of my mother, wot I ain't seen this ten year. Tramped it all the way, I did, an' brought back a few apples for the kids. Ain't yer comin' up, Liz?"

The elder Lizzie mounted the stairs of the Gutter Castle with a bursting heart and brimming eyes.

"I've got me week's money for the dinner to-morrer, Tom," she said.

And then began the laborious collection of the new home of the Lizzies.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Frown of Guttergarten

IN the whole world there is nowhere such an oppression and desperation of loneliness as within that atmosphere of human estrangement which is known behind the cold shoulder of Guttergarten. In spite of the easy familiarity and gay confidence of Gutter-correspondence, scarred memory holds still the sting and torture of that first step into the beloved kingdom under the cruel stare of hostility and the contemptuous laugh of the surprised enemy.

None of us who can remember our initiation will ever quite forget the horror of that first night, when, left to ourselves at last, with the Gutter-world shut off from us by curtained windows and locked doors and the kind swift touch of the Gutter-night, through which reached us only at intervals the drunkard's reeling song or the shrill scream of a woman, we nursed sadly the failure and col-

lapse of the heroic venture and packed our boxes resolutely for that meditated flight to which the morning never tempted us.

It is true that the horror of this great loneliness gradually passed from us, as the Gutter held out its hand to us in hot, clinging grip of friendship from which we were never more to be set free.

But the warning memory of the first cold frown must often return as we are challenged daily by the variable moods and fickle affections of Guttergarten.

Here in my own Gutter-home, in the very heart of familiar associations, I have been so suddenly and bitterly alone!

Where the walls are hung with cheap and unflattering representations of friends among the Gutter-dwellers, where every nook and corner holds a relic and memento of some tremendous event, marked by an offering from Gutter-hands, — an egg-cup from Hastings to celebrate the return of Blanchie in triumph from her first tour, a gaudy china boot from my Johnny, in which he had patiently tended a sickly fern since my last

birthday, and countless other such treasures of abundant inspiration and suggestion.

These dumb mouths were eloquent when the last visitor's hobnailed boots had clattered safely away down the little stairs, and yet I have been lonely and shall, I expect, often be so again, even here.

For I suppose the Gutter will never quite forget, or allow us entirely to ignore the fact, that we were born into a world outside Guttergarten, and can never really share fully the sweet communion of the children of the Kingdom.

Last Sunday afternoon this strange atmosphere of loneliness struck at me with all the force and insolence of an unanticipated blow, as I came in rather later than usual, to find my little sitting-room packed full to overflowing with big factory girls and little Gutter-babies all mixed up together and playing furiously at Ludo. It was my table at which they sat, but there was no room for me. No one stopped playing to greet me and no one had any time to spare for me. A dull feeling of resentment rose within me which a

sudden wisdom and a flash of warning memory urged me to control, and I crept out again into Guttergarten, pushed away by the crowded loneliness of my own hospitality. Presently, I knew, they would all get tired of each other, those self-centred guests of mine who had no thought to spare for me. Then they would slink away without saying good-bye or even a "Toodle-oo," and the atmosphere of that oppressive loneliness would be swept away with them.

In the old days of many mistakes and *gauche* offences in Guttergarten I remember being once overtaken by this same isolation in the middle of a Christmas supper-party.

We had gathered about the long white table laden with candles and flowers and the inevitable gaudy profusion of bilious cakes. Lizzie and Topsy were there side by side, dressed exactly alike in purple plush bodices and a crimson rose poised delicately on the frizzled head of each.

Johnny had brought the boy who blows the organ at the Mission to protect him from the deadly enemy of Gutter loneliness, and

Blanchie had looked in for a few minutes on her way to a professional turn at a public-house concert in the neighbourhood. She was resplendent in all the cheap magnificence of her frilled skirts and slim, pink-stockinged legs, with thin cheeks painted to a hot flush which the stare of coarse criticism and drunken admiration had long ago ceased to kindle there. Her dancing eyes were alive with mischievous invitation and her pert profile tossed self-conscious smiles at us over an impudently tilted shoulder.

"Ain't 'er lovely!" whispered the enchanted company, and the organ-blower was feeling "sweet on her," and fast losing control of his ardent boyish heart.

His name was Laughing Alf, because he had never yet been seen with a straight face. He had an amazing and profound devotion to his sacred vocation, and blew the organ as tenderly as his own mother rocked her baby's cradle, but he could not help smiling over it all the time.

"I wish you would not let your face slip so frequently!" the Gutter Parson had once

peevishly remarked when the broad enjoyment upon the organ-blower's honest face had more than usually irritated him during the Office Hymn. But in spite of this reproof, which Laughing Alf took bitterly to heart, his face continued to slip in the accustomed way and his nickname stuck to him through the years. On the other side of the table storm clouds were gathering. The younger Lizzie was forgetting herself. Her temper was slowly rising and nobody knew exactly why.

"Wotcher grinnin' at, yer fule?" she suddenly enquired sharply of Laughing Alf, whose shy grimaces above his plate of Christmas pudding had fixed their wandering attention in her direction.

"It don't matter which ways yer looks at 'im, 'e's always laughin'. If 'e were to drop dead afore our very eyes, 'e'd still be laughin' all the time we was layin' of 'e out!" Topsy observed irritably, with a glance at her pal's wrathful profile.

Special Johnny's puzzled countenance rose suddenly, round and greedy, from the overloaded plate which had, till this point, entirely

absorbed his attention. He had recognised the fact that Laughing Alf, for whose introduction to the company and subsequent behaviour he was painfully responsible, had become the centre of an atmospheric disturbance.

He plunged furiously with a cruel thin elbow at the ribs of his disorderly protégé. "I'll stick me bleedin' fork in yer silly old eye in a minute," he warned him, while the nervous Alf smiled blandly on.

On the other side of the narrow strip of white table the younger Lizzie had abandoned herself completely to an acute attack of the Gutter-sulks. Her dark face rose above the bright flowers and trembling candle-flames, set in rigid frowns, and her black eyes flashed wild and narrow under her lowered brows.

There was an uncomfortable sense of coming disaster in the air, and the pudding cooled untasted while we waited for the warning of the inevitable explosion.

Lizzie, wrapped in her sulks, refused speech but the others began to chatter foolishly.

"I can make people cry," bragged the Art Nursling; "it's a much finer thing to do than

making them laugh. There ain't a dry eye in the 'Ouse when I'm singing 'Mother's little blue-eyed boy.'"

"Yer clever if yer can make Laughin' Alf cry, then!" snapped Topsy, who was upset at her friend's confusion. "'E's got no feelin's at all in 'im! 'E 'as n't!"

At this point an expert hostess might have done much to remedy the situation, but over me had swept suddenly that fiercely annihilating wave of Gutter-loneliness, and I was floundering helplessly in an outside atmosphere, somewhere far away, behind the shrug and the frown of Guttergarten.

In another moment Blanchie would have taken on a bet to subdue the persistent merriment of Alf with the cunning of her arts. But loud knocks below announced the arrival of those who were to take her from us to charm another audience.

"It's my Dadda! I ain't goin' with 'im!" she protested firmly; and we waited for the usual scene as she tripped away defiantly to greet him with cheerful opposition.

"It don't suit me to come just now! Shan't

dance and sing till I chooses any'ow, even if yer do make me! And if yer 'its me, yer'll only black me eye, or spoil me new dress! Leave me be, I tells yer!"

There was only a very brief discussion over the matter. A man's harsh laugh and a little frightened squeal of pain and we knew that Blanchie had been reduced to submission.

"Whacky-whack!" said Special Johnny with solemn intelligence, and we heard the catch in the proud little voice that called bravely up the stairs, "Toodle-oo, girls, I'm out of this scene!"

With the Art Nursling's departure had evaporated every faint ray of sunshine and hopeful suggestion from the gloomy atmosphere of that table where I was a stranger among my own guests.

"Ain't 'er come over red in the mug!" remarked Johnny clumsily, as his observant eyes fell before the frowning gaze of Lizzie. It was always the part of Special Johnny to pounce upon the psychological moment and hasten the crisis in any complication of Gutter-affairs. Once again in the long history

of our correspondence he had come to the rescue. For Lizzie's sulking fit broke into a hot burst of passion and drove her out wrathfully from us. Topsy rose in dignity to hasten to her aid with consolation, while the bitter cloud of Gutter-loneliness lifted slowly, and the warm heart of Guttergarten smiled out at me in sympathy once more, between the nervous excitement of Alf's hysterics and the healthy greed of Special Johnny's insatiable appetite as he made a careful tour of the neglected plates and gathered up with a patient sticky finger every unappreciated luxury.

"Serve 'er glad," he declared amid the difficulties of an over-crowded mouth; "next time there's a party, there won't be no party; Little Johnny come by 'isself. 'Er ain't got no call to show off all those hairs afore company!"

But it was a useful lesson without which the educational system of Guttergarten would have been quite incomplete. For never since have I lightly undertaken the perilous function of a Gutter-hostess, and I am never

likely to forget the awful significance, the freezing horror of the frown of Guttergarten.

There is a time coming when we must yet more seriously contemplate the fickle humours and moody temper of the beloved country. Somewhere down in the deep and gentle breast of Guttergarten sulks the lion heart of disappointed and perverse humanity. It is the Gutter Parson's pet, like the wolf of St. Francis, but it is not half tamed yet and cannot be trusted quite to lick his hand. The Philanthropist pats and caresses it, and the Politician pacifies it with many an improbable promise. But the sudden sulk of Guttergarten and the occasional unaccountable lack of response to our efforts among the Gutter-dwellers warns us that the great Beast in Guttergarten is still crouching for the spring.

There are some mornings when Guttergarten gets up in a bad temper and gives no reason at all for the phenomenon of its grey and sullen face. Yesterday, perhaps, the Gutter Parson on his long round of sick-calls may have been greeted deferentially, and with

the most astonishing cheerfulness by every visible member of his straying flock.

"Mornin', Uncle," squealed the factory girls, with merry courtesy; the old women blessed him with profound devotion, and the Gutter-babies called loudly to one another of his arrival among them and swarmed round him in a little body-guard till he reached his destination.

"What number did yer say, Mister? — twenty-two? — 'ere 't is, two knocks and a walk-in. 'Er died this mornin', Father. She's a beautiful corpse."

And then they waited for him till his ghastly visit was ended and he was ready to be escorted somewhere else.

But to-morrow perhaps it may be very different. The strings of factory girls will only stare rudely and collapse in hysterical amusement after he has passed.

"Good morning, — a fine day!" he will remark to the very same weary old women as they stare drearily out of their tired eyes at him without pleasure and without welcome.

"'Ere's Father!" the Gutter-babies will

soon herald him, but with a curious subtle note of malice and distrust in their shrill threatening voices. And it will be quite representative of the extraordinary attitude of this new phase of Guttergarten if Special Johnny suddenly springs up in the way with his little fists menacingly doubled, saying, — "I'll knock the bleedin' 'ead off of you!"

I have been a long time among the Gutter-dwellers, and I have seen Guttergarten turn its face from me many times, but I have never been told the reason of this change of heart or known why such a bitterness of punishment was inflicted upon me.

Even the Gutter-babies fasten themselves about one's heart with their small clinging fingers and wistful affections, only to loose themselves suddenly now and then with a painfully self-assertive independence.

"I don't speak to 'er no more!" declares one after another of the little people as they drop abruptly and with the most wilful assurance out of the very centre of one's life into an abyss of profound indifference.

"Don't lose one of them!" is the warning

cry that rings through this Guttergarten of many treasures. But in spite of every care they will give us the slip, though they always come back again and just as soon as they feel the real need of us. It is possible that some day perhaps we shall in this way lose the whole of Guttergarten at once.

Of course there has always been a Beast in every garden, but the Beast that is led by the little hands of the Gutter-baby is big enough to-day to make cowards of some of us. The ancient Quest has always had very much less to do with the Beast Bogey, which is so grossly evident, than with the Elusive Rose of the desired Treasure, which is secreted in the deep Mystery of the Garden Bower.

And so it happens that in Guttergarten the struggle which must somehow terminate in the conquest of the Beast is a matter of secondary importance only to most of us. But the mystic Rose for which we are ready to storm Guttergarten, in spite of brute growling and the briar-hedge, is the fresh and budding sweetness of a Gutter-baby's heart.

CHAPTER XXV

Thursday

DICKY, the one-legged crossing-sweeper, quite contrary to his usual habits, was spending the evening at home.

He sat beside his wife's bed, with a pathetically injured expression on his weatherbeaten face, for she was dying. There was nothing he could think of that had not been done for her, and yet she was dying.

He had even bought her a little bunch of grapes in the market on the way home. He knew she had always had a fancy for them, though he had never thought of buying them for her before.

"'Ave a grape, me gal!" he had said, displaying his gift with self-conscious gratification, and she had not cared to disappoint him. So he had spent an unprofitable half-hour in removing the pips from the little skinny green bags with clumsy, patient fingers. It seemed

to him as if she had quite enjoyed them, until he discovered that they were all collecting in a little heap in a handkerchief under the pillow. He had been very cross with her then over her wilful deception, and she had cried. And he had kissed her. He did not remember having kissed her before since they were married. She was not pleasant to kiss at all. He noticed how dark and shrivelled her skin was, almost like the leather on his own boot. They had told him her inside was eaten away with cancer. Bah! it made him feel quite sick.

That doctor was a fraud. He had been coming regularly every day, and what good had he done her? Those parish doctors that you did n't have to pay for were no class. She was dying, after all. He began to think what it would be like in Guttergarten without her. He would have to make his own tea and frizzle his own bacon when he came in. Who would do his washing? He found himself suddenly wondering how one made a bed, or cleaned out a room. These things had always happened in his home, somehow. Perhaps they would not happen any more. He had

often envied his wife sitting at home by the fire all day while he shivered in the wind-swept street or shovelled up the greasy mud while the rain drenched his poor deformed body through his thin ragged clothes. Perhaps she had been busy after all. Who would mend for him now, and patiently patch those frayed and threadbare trousers through another winter? A wave of intensely real emotion shuddered through the heart of the crossing-sweeper as he looked at the pitiful twisted face of his dying wife.

And then quite suddenly he remembered that there were other women in Guttergarten. Women who *could* be kissed and even "treated"; gorgeous women, some of them, with big eyes and saucy tongues. He supposed any woman would do all those little things in his home just like his wife. She was dying. Well, let her die, then, — the sooner the better, for he knew that her pains were cruel. He found himself hoping that it would happen very soon. Perhaps if the Gutter Parson came she would die quicker. It was his business to start people on the last jour-

ney. That was one of the things they kept him for. Anyway, it was right for her to see the Priest, of course. He had never been a religious man himself; still he had not gone to bed, that he could remember, without saying a "Glory be" since he was a little lad at the Sunday School. He called loudly up the stairs of the Gutter Castle for the elder Lizzie who "did" for him and the sick wife just now.

"I've now took a fancy into me 'ead to 'ave the Priest fetched to my gal!" he explained.

The elder Lizzie gave him an incredulous stare. Then she lifted a corner of her apron to one eye and wiped it slowly.

"Wot?" she asked still staring.

Dicky repeated his information. "I've a fancy as my gal should 'ave the Priest fetched to 'er!"

Lizzie dropped the corner of her apron abruptly and her eyes grew round and dry.

"Yer devil!" she said; "yer must be a-wishin' of she to die, and after all me trouble, too. I'm sure I've treated 'er as fair as me own sister. I'll fetch the Priest me very

self, and me prayer is you'll be done in yer eye. There's many a sick creature 'e's put on their pore legs again, just when they thought they was gone!"

Dicky went back to his watch beside the sick-bed. The Gutter Parson would be here presently. He was known to be very prompt on such occasions, but the crossing-sweeper was feeling a little queer inside. It was tiresome, that way the women had of knowing just what you would never have thought of telling anyone. Women were mean things; perhaps, after all, those other women, with bold eyes and lips he could kiss, would not do for him so quietly as this poor dying creature had done. But he was sure it was right for the Priest to be fetched. He was not a religious man, no one could laugh at him for that. He had never been to Church for what he could get like some others. But the children had been to Sunday School regularly. Perhaps he trusted more than he knew to his nightly repetition of "Glory be." Anyhow, he did feel certain that when his last moment came, he would expect the Gutter Parson to

see him safely through. He had not thought at all what would happen if he died suddenly in a fit or by accident. He could not think of such things. God would be kind to the last to the one-legged crossing-sweeper. And yet Dicky knew that at the bottom of his heart he was looking forward to this visit with dim apprehension. Nobody knew what nonsense the elder Lizzie might have been talking, as she hurried the Gutter Parson to obey his summons. Perhaps when they arrived he would tell the gentleman that his wife was better. A new idea suddenly came to him; perhaps the dying woman would not want to see the Priest at all. In the mean time he felt that he wanted to be kind to her.

She was sitting up with a bundle of pillows behind her, and her head sunk forward on her shrunken breast. Now and then she stretched out a lean hand and groped about with it in the darkness which had gathered round her and sometimes her blackened lips moved feebly, "'Elp me!"

"I am 'elpin' yer, me gal," said Dick tenderly; "wot can I do for yer?"

"I wants me Communion on Thursday!" whispered the sick woman.

Dicky remembered suddenly that she had often slipped out on Sunday mornings early; he had thought she used to buy the meat then. If he had known she was going to Church there would have been a row. So after all she had deceived him. She had not been a good wife to him. She was dying,—the sooner the better!

"Termorrer," said Dicky. "We need n't wait till Thursday."

"Thursday," whined the sick woman; "I said Thursday."

It was the Gutter Parson who stood suddenly near him at the bedside and startled Dicky. So he had come, and he had walked in just as if the place belonged to him. The Crossing-sweeper would have liked to swear, but he did not. He looked up once at that quiet kindly face, the face of a strong man with two legs and a mind that was not shifty like his own, and he did not look again.

He had never got out of his own room quite so quickly before since the amputation of his

left leg, but he had been glad to go when the Priest had asked to be left alone with the dying woman. He felt like a stranger in there, with his own wife and the Gutter Parson both talking about things he did not understand. He began to wish he had gone with her to buy the meat on Sundays.

When he was called back again into the room, he came creeping and looking curiously about him. The Gutter Parson was putting a violet ribbon into his pocket.

"I'll bring you the Blessed Sacrament to-morrow!" he promised.

"Thursday; I said Thursday!" muttered the sick woman.

The Gutter Parson looked dubious, for it seemed scarcely possible that the withered shrunken body on the bed could imprison a human soul so long.

"Well, Thursday!" he agreed reluctantly; and Dicky was alone on the doorstep.

When he went back to the bedside, his wife was whispering feebly, "Is it Thursday yet?" she asked.

All that night and all next day the question

was perpetually on her lips, "Is it Thursday yet?"

Dicky was feeling vaguely uneasy. What would happen on Thursday? He did not want to be so near to God. He did not want them to bring God to his home. Dicky had always had pleasantly dim ideas about God before. Somewhere or other in a big place called Heaven he believed that God sat on a big throne. But this was so real and so near, he would have liked to run away, only some dim suggestion of loyalty held him chained to that awful mysterious muttering figure on his bed who called to him so often to "'elp" her, and who was waiting like himself for Thursday.

At last the day came. Dicky woke up in the grey dawn wondering what was the matter. Suddenly he remembered. It was Thursday. "Yus, 't is!" he answered as he caught sight of the pale lips moving beside him.

The day grew slowly while the sick woman waited joyfully and Dick shuddered.

"I ain't never done nothin' wrong to nobody!" he kept assuring himself.

At seven o'clock the elder Lizzie appeared, and exiled him. Her preparations took a long time, and later on a stranger came to assist her. Presently the bell in the little Mission Chapel began to ring and he heard the dying woman ask if it were Thursday. Perhaps they had not answered her; he crept into the room and looked fearfully round.

"It's Thursday!" he said with a trembling voice.

"Ain't 'E comin' soon?" asked the sick woman, with a little despairing cry.

Dicky thought it would be soon. He watched the two candles on the white-spread table. They were guttering in a cold unnatural draught that stirred through the room. He put out a hesitating hand to close the window and saw that it was fastened. A great dread took possession of him and suddenly he dropped on his knees and realised that he was caught in a trap. There was no time for him to escape now; if he lifted his bowed head for an instant, he knew that he would meet the Face of God and die.

For this little stuffy familiar room, with its

scanty hired furniture for which he paid tenpence a night, with Sundays thrown in, had at that moment become the holiest spot in Guttergarten.

"O Gawd, don't come into my 'ouse!" whined the miserable Dicky. But he knew that He had come, and even then he was grovelling in the dust before the mysterious Prisoner of the Pyx.

The awful reality of this Presence was so different from Dicky's ordinary dim conception of the far-away God Who could be forgotten and even blasphemed.

Oh, if only he could get away! But he would never be able to get away again, — he would never be able to forget.

Dicky was nursing a whining, cowardly heart, and praying for the withdrawal of that intensely real and dreadful Thing.

But that did not happen, even with the Gutter Priest's own intention. "Behold the Lamb of God!"

Within that White Circle the burning Heart of God throbbed through the stillness of the little room and scorched the shrinking soul of

Dicky. But the bowed body on the bed, with its stiffened discoloured lips and sightless eyes, had lost the power to become the tabernacle of the Host and its doors were shut fast against the approaching Guest.

The blood was surging in Dicky's veins and singing in his ears, but he dared not lift his head. He heard them laying the body down flat in the bed. One of the pillows slipped to the floor beside him. He heard his wife speak in a voice that did not belong to her at all. She was dying and they were her last words. He listened eagerly for them.

"Put me out straight!" she muttered.

"She's thinking of her coffin, pore dear!" explained the elder Lizzie; "'er was always thoughtful up to the last!"

Then she pulled out those crumpled twisted limbs tenderly, and whispered into the dying ear, "Don't yer fret, me gal, yer'll make a lovely corpse!"

The Gutter Parson was saying a prayer, and before he had quite finished the elder Lizzie crept behind Dicky and flung up the window.

Five minutes later the little room held only himself and Something hidden away under a sheet on the bed.

The crossing-sweeper got up slowly. The little candles were still smoking on the white-spread table, but the air was empty. He knew that he was changed, though he had only very vague ideas how the change would declare itself. He might join the Salvation Army or he might get drunk. In the mean time he would kneel down on the dirty floor and say a "Glory be!" before that little throne where the Terrible One had rested.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Palm Boy

SOMEWHERE high up in the blue void that hung above the real Guttergarten of actual fact, floated a heaven of imaginary Idea, into which the little mind of Special Johnny made bold ecstatic ventures. And often in those inquisitive flights he brought back with him some captive thought which attached itself to the hard edges of the real Gutter-experience and became in time "his idea." And then, as he struggled with the expression of it, in order that he might share it in the mysterious communion of his own people, one frequently caught vivid, sudden glimpses of that other land of dream and promise, where the wandering minds of the Gutter-babies lose themselves now and then.

Out of this other land come the new-made Gutter-babies, who take quite a long time to get used to the real Guttergarten, to learn its

speech and become initiated into all the secret ways of the little wild people.

Some of them did not stop long. Perhaps they were frightened; at first big people were very rough with new Gutter-babies. But it was silly of them not to have waited a little longer. Things were so very different in Guttergarten as you grew older. They had certainly lost a splendid chance. It was very wrong and foolish to fling away the kingdom of Guttergarten with the first tear.

And some of them came back again and again. They could not rest in the other land when they had once seen Guttergarten and heard a Gutter-baby laugh.

There was little Arthur, for instance.

"Your Mother's got a born byby!" said Special Johnny to Boy Jones, the little black-eyed Welshman in the Gutter Castle.

"'Er ain't, then!" protested Boy Jones.

"Yer bleedin' liar! I see the doctor!"

"'Er ain't got no born byby, though!" persisted Boy Jones.

"'Er 'ave a born byby; ain't I 'eard it 'oller?"

"Well, it ain't no born byby if yer 'ave!"

"Well, 'ow can it 'elp bein' er born byby if it 'ollers?"

"Well, I knows it do 'oller!" admitted Boy Jones; "but it won't not fer long!"

"Why, yer ain't goin' ter throttle it, are yer?" said Johnny, with a sudden hopeful interest.

"No, I ain't; I don't love 'im very much, but I would n't go for to 'urt 'im — certainly not!"

"Then I'll knock yer bloody 'ead off!" announced Johnny, with scorn, "'cos yer 'ave got a born byby, yer lyin' devil!"

The Boy Jones stuck two helpless fists into his black tear-dimmed eyes and sobbed. He was a smaller Gutter-baby than Johnny and his mother had kept him "nice." He was not fit to be alone in the wild places of Gutter-garten, and he repented bitterly of entering into conversation with Special Johnny.

"Well, I never meant to tell anyone but Mummy, but if you knocks me bleedin' 'ead off, that ain't no born byby. 'E comes every year and 'e goes away again in a few days; 'e 's little Arthur; 'e ain't no byby!"

"Don't 'e grow?" asked Johnny, deeply interested.

"No, 'e don't grow, nor nothink like that; 'e 's some little pigeon, 'e is, says Mummy!"

"Will 'e go termorrer, p'r'aps?"

" 'E don't go, 'e flies; 'ave yer done with me 'ead?"

"Yaas, I won't touch yer 'ead. Wish I 'ad a little pigeon," said Johnny regretfully.

"I don't know 'ow it is, Miss; I lose all my babies. I'm sure they don't want for nothin', and others as do, and run the streets and all, the Lord don't notice. It ain't very encouraging to a woman. I shan't rear none of mine, I think, sometimes; they are a 'andful, Miss!" said poor Mrs. Jones, as, surely enough, two days later, the pigeon Arthur deserted his cradle.

We have even seen the outline of the other land as we stood together in awe and wonder, upon the very edge of the great unknown.

It was at Southend, as the little white waves rolled up across the mud, and washed the slimy legs of Special Johnny.

"Can't yer see the other land plain?" said

my Gutter-baby, with his wistful gaze turned out to sea.

For below the bank of red-hot clouds and behind the dropping sun, and through the folds of the mist we traced, quite clearly, the mystic outline of the other land.

There had been much to wonder at all day. There had been merry little jumping prawns to play hide-and-seek with us in the slippery pools, and trails of blistered seaweed to pop; there had been waves to dance with, and little bazaars and funny side-shows on the crowded promenade; but as the excursion train whirled us home to Guttergarten, through the evening shadows of this wonderful day, in the midst of a thousand memories, I watched now and again the strange deep light rekindle in the Gutter-baby's eyes, as they turned out to sea once more, and mapped out the boundary-line of the other land.

And once again in the green heart of the Park, as the blue mists rose high between the dark lines of the trees, and the lights of London were jumping all round us, as we travelled a long way across country in quest of an

unfamiliar tower which climbed like a grey and silver thread out of our world of solid fact and beckoned us away.

It was with swift and sudden steps that we set out on that journey into the unknown. It is only when we do not know where we are going that we move with real energy, and direction. For this is the path of ecstasy, that fails abruptly when we begin to realise what a barren harvest, after all, is ours in the land of human discovery.

"Ain't it a lovely little castle? Shall we both live there?" suggested Special Johnny joyously.

"Ain't it the 'Oly City?" he chattered on. "Will there be Palm Boys there?"

I knew that now I had stumbled on one of his "ideas."

What was a Palm Boy? And how did this unfallen inhabitant of the Gutter-baby's Heaven represent the height of his ambition?

"Will I be a little Palm Boy if I gets there?" he questioned eagerly.

"What is a Palm Boy, Johnny?"

"I dunno!" said Johnny sadly. "And I

dunno 'ow yer comes to be a Palm Boy, but I wishes as 'ow I was one!"

Who could have guessed the secret inspiration of the Gutter-baby's life. And so through all his merry wild existence in Guttergarten, in the quiet places of his mind Special Johnny had hugged the pale image of the Palm Boy and fought bravely with his own alarmingly forcible little personality for its safety.

It is true that when we found the Palace of our quest, it pretended to be the Albert Memorial, but the Gutter-babies are not so easily taken in. We heard the mocking laughter of the illusive land and the children of the mist scattered before us as we started home.

But the ghostly terror that shrivelled up the little heart of Special Johnny with its dread was the round white moon that hung itself sometimes in the night of Guttergarten and flooded the shadows with a pale unearthly brilliance.

"There's a white woman in there!" he told me, once, in trembling awe; "'er frits little Johnny!"

"That's only the Moon, Johnny."

"Well, I knows as that is what they says!" admitted Johnny.

But he knew much better than that, and often, beneath the spell of the white witch, a moon-struck Gutter-baby sat up with wide bright eyes of terror and watched with curious distrust the round pale light floating ominously over Guttergarten.

"Please Gawd, there won't be no Moon tonight!" he would pray piously, as he tucked himself away in the blanket, and listened for the voices of the other land.

CHAPTER XXVII

Among the Deaf and Dumb

A BROAD belt of widening sunlight brightened the dismal, chilly garret where Jane was sleeping. For many days past she had been just a handful of shrunken bones heaped together in a reclining posture among her cushions. But this morning she was to wake with a new mind sensitive to impressions, and capable once more of suggestion and response, with a new strong consciousness, too, of the things of life appealing to the reviving activities within herself.

What had happened? Ah, yes, she could remember now. She had been going to die.

The old Gutter-world that she had loved so dearly, and the friendly faces that had once seemed so familiar, had slowly withered into the distance, which is beyond correspondence and recognition. It is true that they had been for a long time much less real to her than the mysterious creature-life of her own

delirium; but now they were going from her altogether.

She was quite ready to die.

The earth-dream had lately become a monotonous and meaningless repetition, and those sad faces that watched about her were foolish tear-washed masks.

And then, while the shadows closed in upon her with their deep and intense invitation, a human voice had called to her suddenly and imperatively out of the emptiness of that other almost forgotten side of things, to which belonged the clock that was ticking away the minutes, and the glass of water which she still needed from time to time.

For now she was to live again.

Outside her window, in the street below, the busy Gutter-life hummed on its careless way, and claimed her interest once more. She had been told that the miraculous interference which had thrown her back into the heart of Guttergarten would mean, if it occurred, that some tremendous destiny had been allotted to her. Vague wonder and inquisitive speculation as to the nature of this

new and sudden vocation began to occupy her sick fancy. Like the Blessed Jeanne, whose name she bore, she saw herself, now, riding through the ranks of the enemy with the honour of the Gutter-dwellers streaming like a white flag in her hands. It would have been so much easier to die.

"There ain't nothink that I ever 'eard of to live for!" she had often told those watching faces that surrounded her. "Don't take on about me dyin', it's no use kickin' up a shindy now. I ain't 'ungry any more!" she had assured them.

All the arrangements for the great journey had been completed. Her mother had been stitching away industriously during those last interminable days and nights at the new black.

"It don't do to be took all of a sudden," she explained. "There'll be more and enough to do at the last, mark my words!"

Her little sisters did not scruple to tell her about their wonderful new dresses with crêpe bows and all, and of how they had been dared, in spite of their aching appetites, to touch

those two sacred pennies on the shelf which she knew were solemnly destined to rest soon upon her own tired, heavy eyelids. Yes, they had all been quite ready, and then had come the sudden closing of the ways and the biting snap of driven bolts, as the Gates of Guttergarten defied abruptly her ambitious venture. Memory traced weakly for her the dim outline of the Priest's white garments and the shadowy hands with which he anointed her, but the gracious touch of Mystery was still heavy upon her senses. For one second of earth she had been poised in the timeless grasp of certainty, and in that brief flash of experience had learnt things which could never be told by her to the little men and women of the earth-dream, who were still patiently wearing out their thin lives in the fretting battle of the survival. With a quiet smile she remembered now all the peevish perversity with which she had fussed over the last preparations.

"Not me feet!" she had exerted all her despairing strength to cry, with a strange reluctance to offer those poor crippled useless members to the operations of Mystery.

There had even been tears of rebellious helplessness when no one had caught her meaning.

"Not me feet," she was struggling to protest, in that toneless sinking voice that was no longer her own, while the gathering darkness called to her fancy out of a little yawning mouth among the nameless graves in the cemetery. And now those very feet, by a curious whim of Mystery, not to-day or to-morrow, perhaps, or even the day after to-morrow, but one day, were to carry her out once again into Guttergarten upon some tremendous errand, while the wisdom of the shadows lay hidden in her heart.

There was a sound of heavy boots beside her bed, and the round stolid figure of Lily Ann rolled into view suddenly, and with this unquestionably material apparition, in one shock, the whole complicated machinery of the old Gutter-life was set in motion, and the earth-dream forced itself back into intense realisation once again.

Jane observed that the podgy polished face of Lily Ann was drawn solemnly into unusual

proportions. She was in fact making heroic efforts to conceal from her suffering sister the warm-hearted eager enjoyment of her own robust and brimming life.

"Well, I never!" she said at last, as with widening puzzled eyes she examined this new Jane, who had so unexpectedly returned from the far country beyond the pale limit of Lily Ann's wildest thoughts. "No, I never did!"

Jane smiled feebly. "I'm better!" she explained in a whisper.

Lily Ann had recently departed from the home circle to her first place. "I always likes to get me gals out as soon as possible," her mother had often said. "Them's better off by a long ways with their legs under someone else's table."

And so Lily Ann had reluctantly abandoned an excellent connection in step-cleaning, strangled her ambitious yearnings for the pickle factory where her "young feller" had an interest, and started out into the world the day after she had "turned fourteen," with a shabby little box that her mother had used before her, packed full of borrowed clothes.

She was ready and willing to scrub and wash till further notice, but she still kept her self-respect and refused to wear a cap.

"The day Lily Ann puts on one of them little bonnets 'er leaves the profession," she had firmly warned her new mistress.

So Lily Ann was humoured because of her prodigious aptitude for scrubbing, until her Gutter-pride should be conquered by the desire for promotion and the greed of increased wages.

Lily Ann had come home for her weekly visit to-day with her courage screwed up for an interview with her sister's corpse, and with half her earnings in a fat little purse in her pocket.

Her squat broad figure and glowing ruddy face seemed to be swollen with importance.

"Ain't yer a fair marvel, though? Me and Mother quite thought as you was gone las' week!"

"No, I'm not going; I'm real better!" said Jane with a shadow of disappointment that there should be nothing more to say about it all to Lily Ann.

"Why, you're a fair treat to what yer was!"

And Lily Ann settled down to the inevitable and accepted the tremendous miracle before her with her usual unquestioning simplicity. As she chattered away of the little things of that tiny edge of life upon which she stood, the prison walls seemed to be closing in upon the dumb soul of Jane and blotting out the vision of that wide free atmosphere which had lately become her home. She did not know that this must be, or that her own safety lay in the bitterness of captivity. For the mind that climbs highest is capable of the most ambitious descents and ecstasy is safest in the prison of a bed or an anchorite's cell.

Lily Ann was talking about her little place. She did not like it "not such a wonderful much." The cook was a bit tiresome. Lily Ann had had to give her a piece of her mind to go on with.

"'Can't yer keep that oven goin'?' she says to me. 'Not ef yer sticks yer great carcase in the light!' I tells 'er. So she says, says she, 'Now, then, none of yer rudery!' She ain't 'arf

a mis'able old stick. — Oh, yes, they feeds yer lovely, and the time passes all right, but I looks at the clock of an evenin' and thinks to meself, it's nearly over. I think I'm happiest when it's time to go to bed!"

Here Lily Ann's shrill voice became a little jerky, and she continued between frequent gulps, "Sometimes I think 'ome sweet 'ome's the 'appiest place after all!" and poor Lily Ann dropped her podgy heated face on to her broad chest and gave way completely.

Jane was moved to sympathy at once, and longed bitterly for words to tell this homesick Gutter-bound little creature of its absurd limitations and unreasonable affections.

"Never mind," she said; "I've bin away, too, and yer gets used to it, Lily Ann!"

Lily Ann sat up and mopped her eyes with her coat-sleeve. She was quite accustomed to the sick girl's ravings; there had been more than one night when she had had to help her mother to hold her down in bed. Perhaps Jane was not so much better, after all, and she had been talking too much, and exciting her.

"Oh, no, no, not at all; yer ain't bin nowhere, don'cher worry; yer shan't go to no nasty Infirmary, not while I can work. Not ef I 'as ter give yer 'arf me money every week and doos without me noo 'at on 'Oliday Monday."

Lily Ann rose to take her departure, planting a sounding kiss upon Jane's paralysed lips, and hurried away uncomforted. She would never be able to hear and never be able to understand even if one day a further wonder should open the mouth of the miracle of Jane.

And even if she both heard and understood she would only say, "Oh, yus, but not for the likes of me it ain't so. I likes the old ways best!"

It is easy to see why no one has ever been able to convert the Gutter-dwellers. They feel safest in their own rut after all. But Jane was still dumb and Guttergarten was deaf. She turned over upon her pillows and went quietly to sleep.

It was far the best and wisest thing for her to do. This is the last refuge of the Adventurer

and holds the secret science of the shadows and their dreams.

Her face had been growing thin and weary with effort, but now the dumb lips had slipped into peaceful smiles. She was at home again among mouths that speak and listening ears, among the grand realities of insanity.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Christmas Tree

WE were cutting bread and butter for our very lives, and loading the long narrow tables in the schoolroom with the good things that Gutterbabies love.

From time to time a happy approving face appeared for an instant at the high windows, as one and another of the little wild people climbed laboriously out of Guttergarten to satisfy his own curiosity and encourage our progress with yells of delight.

"Not enough yet?" we asked at frequent intervals, with increasing weariness.

And the Gutter Parson always said, "Nothing like!"

So we turned again to our saws and packed up plates of bread and butter and cake to satisfy the ferocious appetites of that strange army of the Gutter Parson's guests which would be soon upon us. He was very busy

himself in our midst. For in the heart of the Feast he had set the Gutter-babies' Christmas Tree, and even now he was poised at the summit of the high ladder which we were not to touch and watched in panic, that he might clip tiny candles and swing gorgeous baubles from its heavy branches.

As we pursued our ceaseless occupations, between the shocks of the saw, as it cleft a loaf of bread into twenty pieces, the girl who worked beside me began to talk.

"It's come over me all of a sudden, do you know, Miss, as 'ow I wants to get married. What do you think about 'usbands, Miss?"

Before I could answer suitably, she was off again for a fresh supply of butter, but soon returned full of her new idea.

"I got off just now, Miss, with a p'leeceman, when I fetched them cakes in for you. 'E says to me, 'You're lookin' very 'appy, Miss, I 'opes yer feels it?' I says, 'Perhaps I do.' 'E says, 'I ain't never seen yer 'ere before; girls like you don't live in this street.' So I says, 'No, I don't live 'ereabouts.' 'E says, 'Where *do* you?' I says, 'I don't know

as I cares to tell yer that.' If you were me, Miss, would you go out and fetch some more cakes?"

Already the myriad candles on the Gutter-babies' Tree were springing into leaping tongues of precious flame, and a furious battery at the door warned us to apply ourselves still more vigorously to our labour.

"It 'ud be nice if I 'ad a little 'ome and you could come in and give me an 'and with the byby, would n't it?"

At last we were ready. Some of us made for the door. It was very evident from the sounds of revelry there that our guests were not going to be late. The girl who had been working beside me was pressing eagerly to the front. I half suspected that behind the apparent selflessness of her fearless energy were hopes of the policeman outside. And, indeed, it sounded from within as if we should have all hailed his presence with grateful pleasure.

But in Guttergarten, the friends of the Gutter-dwellers must not associate with the Force. To be seen once in their company is to be cast forth for ever from society, unless of course you are "getting off" with one of

them. For even policemen must have wives and babies, or where would the new policemen come from?

But if you lose your way in Guttergarten you must not ask a policeman to help you. There are always plenty of Gutter-babies about. If you want to know the time, there is the clock on the little Mission Tower. We know it is strangely erratic, and the hands toil slowly uphill, and slide joyfully downwards on the other side, but it is "The Time" in Guttergarten, and there are the "hooters" besides, and the Angelus, and the spiteful tinkle of the school-bell.

We had gathered at the door. In another moment it would be flung wide to the yelling street. There would be a wild rush of the little people upon us. Tables and benches and plates of good things would be flung on one side, in the brave quest to be foremost in that ring of glory beneath the Gutter-babies' Tree.

Some of us grew pale with dread, for we had seen the might of Guttergarten let loose before.

But the Gutter Parson was very busy with a little game of his own.

"We won't let them in just yet, dear!" he said; "you see, it would be so very awkward if they knocked us all over, would n't it, dear?"

And then we saw that he was arranging some of the benches in a kind of maze which each Gutter-baby would have to tread carefully all by himself, before he reached one end of the long table where he must slide all along the bench and sit by himself, staring solemnly at the wonder and brightness of the Gutter-babies' Tree until one by one his little mates successfully completed the intricate journey, each in his own turn, and joined him — with a sympathetic "Oo-er!"

It was an excellent idea, of course, and would have saved no end of trouble for everyone. Only excellent ideas do not often come off with the Gutter-babies; if there is a flaw in them concealed anywhere, the little people are quick to grasp it, and they are amazingly suspicious of new methods and the "dodger."

I had dim apprehensions about the success

of this manner of admittance, but hoped for the best.

If it had not been for Special Johnny, there would have most certainly been a tremendous failure. But perhaps there is a Special Johnny to patronise every new invention before it becomes the fashion. Of course it may be so.

As we fumbled with the heavy bolts and rattled at the doors, there was a shrill cry of "Lock-up!" the thud of scampering feet, and a sudden silence, as we were left looking out into an almost empty street. We had nerved ourselves to the great attack, and it was a little disconcerting, but we knew that they would come back again as they had gone, in a body, as soon as the temporary excitement had been subdued. So we stood at attention and waited for them.

Opposite, the tragic ragged figure of old Molly, with her grey locks tangled and scattered in the bitter wind, crouched on the stones and chattered to her muse, as she dipped lumps of stale bread into the can of tea which she had just fetched from the coffee-house for a halfpenny.

Across the street a little higher up, a Gutter-baby was taking his first walk under the eager supervision of the child-mother, Rosie. Into the middle of the road a tiny bundle of rags had tottered and stood swaying there, in bewilderment and the supreme misery of the first desertion. The child-mother cooed and scolded and the Gutter-baby struggled bravely to control his heavy little body. But at the top of the street a little black cloud was already moving in bounds toward us. It was the return of the Gutter-babies, and even now they were upon us, not less the little wild people since their spirits had been thrilled by the excitement of a "Lock-up!"

But they were met by a stern wall of defence, and that strange word which alone, in the whole human vocabulary, has force to dismay the heart of a Gutter-baby — "One at a time, please!"

One at a time! Not if they knew it! *En masse* they possessed an indomitable courage and a heart of steel; but alone, one by one, to venture into the mysterious atmosphere of that other world, that was not of their

making, to stand out as individuals and storm the splendid hospitality of those whom, bringing gifts, they had been schooled to fear, was beyond the daring of the wildest of the little people. Those who had cried "First" so bravely and taken their stand in front fell back now, and a few at the rear began to tail off regretfully. From within, the vision of a mighty feast and the steaming cans of tea stung their appetites to desire, and the majestic circle of the many-coloured, many-lighted Tree, lured and fascinated and tugged within at their heart-strings; but it could not be done. No Gutter-baby, with his senses, who was quite the thing, was going to dive in there, all by himself, with a black-cassocked Parson and a crowd of the other kind of people, with a big door behind him that might slam upon Guttergarten any moment and shut him out for ever from his own kind and the blessed heritage of the Gutter-baby.

They all knew the Gutter Parson. He was "awful kind" when you were sick and he was all right in your own street, but who knew how he might behave, or what he might tell

A Gutter-baby was taking his first walk

you to do, when he got you inside all by himself with no one to see fair play? They could put a curse on you, too, "could they priests," they could make you sick and make you well again.

One at a time! Let him ask them another; "they were n't goin' into no bleedin' party to be caught in a trap."

A fierce wave of claustra-phobia swept over the little wild people and held them fast in its ancient grip. It was the opposite of that other old primeval fear of the open field, which the young Gutter-baby on his first walk and the child-mother were struggling against out there in the wind-swept Gutter-street.

But at this point I singled out Johnny in the expectant crowd and caught his eye appealingly. It was with a tremendous relief that I saw him swagger forward.

"'Oo says little Johnny won't go in?" he bragged.

There was a great stir among the little people. For a moment they swung apart to let the hero pass, but almost at once the mind

of Guttergarten changed. Was this a Gutter-baby braver than his kind? One of themselves who could defy the tribal instinct and the hatred of individualism upon which they had been bred? For a moment the life of Special Johnny was in peril, and he realised it for himself just in time.

"There's a woman in there wot knows little Johnny!" he said confidently. "Her loves little Johnny, her won't let nothink 'appen to 'e inside of there!"

And so our first guest sauntered safely in, scratching his head, and blinking at the glory of the Tree, and embracing the whole scene in one brief word of infinite satisfaction, — "*Oo-er!*"

And now they swarmed in graciously, in one continuous stream, which required no further stimulation to set it in motion.

In a short time the Gutter Parson was rubbing his hands gleefully over the success of his deep stratagem. Guttergarten was within and the doors were fast upon it. And then began that wild and glorious dance of Guttergarten round the Tree.

Of course there was nothing at all original, or unusual, about the Gutter Parson's ideas. He got them all out of Guttergarten, every one of them.

Out there in the Gutter he had seen their little pot-gardens, and had no doubt thought about this big Christmas Bush then. They all had their little Grotto; of course there was nothing funny in the Gutter Parson making one for himself. It would not have been nice if the Gutter-babies had not helped him.

He was only a big, a very big, Gutter-baby, after all. They were silly ever to be afraid of him.

It was just like Guttergarten in here to-night. It was quite easy even to listen to the Gutter Parson's stories. They were such old old stories in Guttergarten. Perhaps they were new to him. They believed he had not always been a Gutter-baby.

There was that one, for instance, about the "Great Lock-up" that made them cry. It was a shame, that was. They would be good babies if they knew how.

And then the Child of the Straw and the

Stable. He must have been a Holy Gutter-baby, for He was the God of Guttergarten, they knew.

When they had finished singing the hymn about "the little Lord Jesus asleep in the 'ay!" Johnny voiced the whole mind of Guttergarten when he told us, with a wide and happy smile, "I've always been friends with 'Im!"

They were Christian Gutter-babies really just then, while their little feet flew round and round the white circle of the flaming Tree, and they heard in the music of the dance and the rustle of those heavily laden boughs with their curious fruits the whisper of Mary's lullaby.

They were little Pagans, perhaps, again, and in their blood was leaping the spirit of ancestors who sacrificed within the deep shadows of the ancient groves in the days when the Tree was an enemy that ate up the land of the Primitive Man.

To us it was a dance of mystery; deep down in the heart of the Underworld lay buried the roots of the Gutter-babies' Tree, but its

branches swept the quivering sky, and shadowed the Burning Throne. Who and what were these little people whom we entertained?

Soon the melting candles would burn low and be carefully extinguished, one by one, till the giddy dance was over and the ring of glory had faded. On the long tables would remain only the wreck and ruin and havoc of our wonderful Feast. Once more Guttergarten would escape from us, with its eternal problem, with its living riddle and its golden heart.

As they filed scampering past us, laden with oranges and the spoils of the Tree, and were quickly gathered up into the night of Guttergarten, I caught Johnny's happy smile, and held it for a minute.

"Ain't we mad little devils?" he cried.

CHAPTER XXIX

An Omo-Pathetic Opinion

THERE'S ten of 'em!" said the younger Lizzie, as the Mission clock warned the hour of Guttergarten. She rose wearily from my armchair, after a prolonged confidential interview, and planted an empty cocoa-cup on the vacant seat, among the shabby cushions. "Ain't it er life, what? Now, all I've got before me to look forward to, is just to turn in and wake up ag'in to another of 'em! But I'm glad I told yer me trouble, Miss, and I won't forget yer, Miss!"

Lizzie had got as far as the door and now hung there lingering wistfully, while her eyes wandered lovingly round the familiar place where she had enjoyed giving me her "evenings," as if in secret farewell.

Within was dimness, except for a little light flickering on the shelf where Lizzie had laid an offering of faded flowers before the image

of Mary, for secrets had passed between us that the gaslight could not know. But illumination poured upon her from the passage. It was a quaint and picturesque little figure that stood framed in the open door. Her small sharp-featured face, with its piquant beauty sadly pinched and whitened in the shock of circumstance, was crowned by a neat row of curling-pins, and above her black hair lay in rolls under a weatherbeaten motor-cap. A worn shawl was dragged across her thin shoulders, and a sloppy skirt dangled to her ankles, and at every angle her unstockinged feet escaped the imprisonment of her boots.

"I do feel mis'able, Miss!" said Lizzie.

Perhaps dimly, in the minds of each of us, was dawning the idea that we were really parting for a more than usually protracted absence. For I had just committed the extreme folly in Gutter-friendship. I had obliged Lizzie with five bob, to get her Sunday dress out of pawn and buy herself a pair of new boots for 'Oliday Monday.

In consequence of this, there could of course be no prospect of seeing Lizzie until a con-

venient time had elapsed, to permit us both to forget the episode.

"I do feel mis'able!" repeated Lizzie.

Suddenly she made a dash at me with a resounding and emphatic kiss, and then bolted for the stairs.

Below, I heard her telling Johnny, brightly, that he ought to be ashamed of "hisself" sitting on my doorstep at that time of night, and that she, a decent girl, was going to her home.

Johnny waited till she had vanished through the door of the Gutter Castle and then bounded in upon me.

"Lord! 'ow girls do jaw!" he said, squatting himself down upon the floor. "This two 'our I've been 'ere waitin' to tell you me news! But I knew you'd be glad to 'ear I've got 'sumption on me pore chest!"

Minute enquiries followed as to the exact nature of this dreadful something which had caused Johnny's sudden interest in his "pore 'ealth." But we got very little satisfaction out of our consultation, and at last we decided to call in the aid of Johnny's mother.

All Johnny knew himself was that he had been to the doctor at the "Omo-Pathetic" dispensary, and the doctor had pulled out a tooth, and told him about his "pore chest."

It was Saturday night; there were very few Gutter-babies about the streets, for this is the one night in the week when they are bathed and put in bed early, while the Gutter-mother goes out to shop for the great festival of the Sunday dinner, and Daddy is drinking somewhere. But Guttergarten was very busy.

We passed rows of stalls, lit by flaming torches and crowded with eager custom. The voices of the hawkers crying their wares pestered us cheerfully as we hurried through the traffic.

"Buy! buy! buy! buy! now, don't miss this little leg o' mutton; slip down yer belly like a wheelbarrer, it will!"

But we were entirely occupied with Johnny's chest. He even coughed once, or at least we fancied that it was so, as we hastened on. At home Johnny's mother was very busy. She was washing Gutter-babies. Johnny had escaped to-night because of his new com-

plaint, but she was now far too absorbed in the difficulties of her occupation to think about him any more.

"Evenin', Miss!" she said. "You'll 'scuse me, won't yer, but this baby's goin' blue in the water. I must wipe 'im over! Sit still, yer devil! Johnny, go and fetch me Phillie! Markie, if you don't put yer shift on, I'll tear the liver out of you! Are you goin', then, Johnny?"

"I ain't goin," said Johnny; "me chest's bad!"

Johnny's mother dropped the blue baby into the bath again, and with soapy arms dived at Johnny's head. But he dodged, wailing piteously, "Yer must n't 'it me; I 'm er pore little Johnny, I'm sick!"

"What's this about Johnny's chest?" I asked, as soon as the chaos had subsided enough to make conversation possible.

To Johnny's mother the sudden question brought to mind a forgotten evil.

"Gawd, Miss, I wish yer 'ad n't mentioned it just now, Miss, with all this lot to bath! 'Ow can I think as I should about 'is pore

chest? My! ain't this baby blue! 'E'll 'ave a fit presently!"

It was quite a considerable time before I could really concentrate the distracted mother's attention upon Johnny's suffering chest, but at last the blue baby cried itself red, and was duly fed and wrapped away in a corner of the big bed, and gradually the other cleansed members of the family accumulated round him. Then at last it was our turn.

"And now, Mrs. Williams, do tell me about the boy's chest!"

Mrs. Williams immediately flung her damp apron over her eyes and began to cry distressingly, and Johnny, stirred to sympathy, ran to her side and wept with her. Mother and son abandoned themselves to grief, and I almost despaired of ever hearing the real facts about the doctor who had pulled out Johnny's tooth and condemned his chest. But at last the storm of sobs showed some sign of exhaustion, and I waited on hopefully to the end.

Johnny, of course, was the first to recover his self-control.

"Mummy, tell my Miss what the doctor says," he persuaded her gently, with his little hands pulling tenderly at her wet apron, and bowed head. "Mummy, do please tell my Miss; she do want to hear what the bloomin' doctor said, don'tcher, Miss?"

I nodded earnestly, and slowly the stricken face of Johnny's mother was lifted up to me.

"Tell the lydy about pore little Johnny!" urged the sufferer patiently. And at last Mrs. Williams began.

"Yer see, Miss, we could n't get no sleep fer Johnny with his 'ead. 'E do 'ave it crool, yer know, Miss; and snore, why 'e wakes us all up if 'e do shut 'is eyes fer a minnit, so I sez as 'ow I'd better take 'im to the Omo-Pathetic just up the road there, and you can get a free ticket for the asking, and no waiting and all! So I arst the doctor to be so kind as ter take 'is tooth out; so he did, and he give 'im a thorough good investigation all over and he says — 'e did reely, O dear! my pore little Johnny! 'e did, Miss, as sure as Gawd's in 'Eaven 'e did!"

An Omo-Pathetic Opinion

Of course I knew it would happen. Just as we were within a word of hearing the truth about Special Johnny's symptoms, maternal emotion again victimized Mrs. Williams, and another burst of grief was added to our suspense. But at last the dreadful verdict was extracted from Johnny's mother, and I knew actually that the kind doctor at the Homœopathic Dispensary, who had a tender heart for Gutter-babies and did not make mistakes, had said our Special Johnny was consumptive.

It was terrible news; to Johnny himself deeply interesting and temporarily very beneficial; to his mother it was one of a long programme of troubles. Johnny's "Dadda" had a shocking cough, and had grown as weak as a baby with it this winter; Mark was tuberculous and for the last year had worn splints, or at least something in the nature of a surgical instrument called after St. Thomas, and one of his legs looked like a hairpin, and the other like a flat-iron. Phillie had adenoids and a thick voice, and even the baby went blue in water. Perhaps, after all, it was hardest upon me. It was a comfort at that

moment to feel assured that Johnny at least thought so.

"I knew you'd be terrible hupset, Miss, I tol' the doctor so. 'She thinks a wonderful lot of my Johnny,' I sez to 'im. But praps, Miss, you'd tell Father Tooley to speak to 'im to be a good boy, seein' as 'ow there's death writ in 'is face, and 'e only seven, too! And will yer be so good as ter give me a letter to the Dispensary, Miss?"

Johnny overtook me on the way home, and pressed something into my hand hurriedly.

"Don'tcher fret yerself, mate, will yer?" he said kindly, and disappeared among the shadows.

I opened the little parcel with a heavy heart, pondering over the mysterious bitterness of Guttergarten, and found inside it, carefully wrapped in pink lint, a small hollow first tooth.

CHAPTER XXX

The Boy in the Wood

THE Summer had passed and with it the glory of Guttergarten. The little pot-gardens had long ago yielded their harvest and been buried, with only a faint and uncertain hope of the resurrection. The last sacred Bonfire had been lit to the mischievous memory of the Eternal Ideal of Treachery, and the last dainty little Grotto had been wrecked in the rain-swept street. Before us was the promise of winter, with its hideous threat of struggle and suffering. The joyous open-air freedom of the Camp-life of the Gutter-dwellers was over for the season.

From this time all domestic observations would have to be made through glass. The thousand little homes of Guttergarten would be full of human life and discord. In time even the wildest of the little people would take refuge from the cruelty of a Gutter-frost, in

night schools and pleasant evenings, and devote their enormous energies to conduct marks and Christmas carols and magic lanterns, until the laughing Spring called to them once more from the deep wonderland of the Gutter-babies' jungle.

Blanchie was making the most of her brief intimacy with us; for we all knew that with the "Panto Season" she must go. Almost momentarily we waited for the ample shadow of the Twins' Mother as it darkened the narrow passage of our open door.

Through the wild music of the Gutter-babies' laughter and the confusion of Guttergarten at play, we knew that Blanchie was listening for the voice that would call her away from us.

It came at last.

Somewhere at the other end of nowhere, Blanchie was wanted to play the "Boy in the Wood."

It was very much against her will that she left us. The part was not what she wanted at all; she loved her petticoats, and laid them aside with bitter regret. It was a nasty low

place, too; she knew all about it. Besides, she was losing her taste for the drama, and was getting too long in the legs for a Baby Wonder. But there was no other way of keeping the foster family; of course she must go. But she would be ever so disagreeable and make them all sorry they were born.

We let her grumble, and we let her go; there was nothing else to do. We knew that she was an Art Nursling and not a real Gutter-baby at all. We knew that the foster papa would soon overcome her displeasure with a buckle and strap, and that very soon Blanchie herself would be singing away happily to the boys in the Gallery, and be wild with the limelight and the tinsel and the nonsense of the game.

Of course Mrs. Ball managed the recovery of Blanchie with the usual daring and gracious skill of the Gutter-lady.

"Of course, Miss, we knows as 'ow you 'ave been most kind to Blanchie, and she such a trying child, too; I often says as 'ow one can't be good when she's around, for she won't let you. I'm sure the things I've said

I did n't know I could 'ave dreamed 'em. But of course, Miss, you see, Miss, as we both know, she 's of an age to be useful and I daresay you 've got a lot out of 'er this long time; but of course we 're doing badly, most indifferent just now, Miss, and I wish we could spare her a little longer, Miss, but we wants 'er ourselves, now the winter 's comin' on, like. Of course, Miss, we don't expect no wages for what Blanchie 's done for you; but I daresay, Miss, as 'ow she 's earned 'er clothes, like, and 'er boot leather!"

And so Blanchie went away and became the Boy in the Wood.

It was a hard winter in Guttergarten and the worst part was to see how hard it was for each other.

The Gutter-babies went about cheerfully as long as possible with blue snivelling little noses and nipped toes and frozen fingers, hidden under their ragged coats. It was only now and then that one found them cuddled up on a doorstep, crying bitterly with hunger and cold. The Soup Kitchens were swarmed, and the Hunger Marches organised. Goose

Clubs were started, and one by one poor little pinched Christmas trees sprang up in the windows of each Gutter-home.

The Gutter-babies ran about the streets singing of the Holy Child, and made solemn pilgrimages to the Gutter Parson's Church, where he had built a little Grotto all to himself, with utter disregard of the Oyster Season, and filled it with real candles and flowers and the most wonderful dolls that had ever been seen.

And the pain and poverty grew, and sickness fell upon the overcrowded homes, scarlet and "dip," and even smallpox now and then, and one after another developed consumption suddenly, and all the Gutter-babies had toothache at once. Christmas brought into Guttergarten sweets and crackers and wonderful shop windows, but it did not bring pennies to buy them.

At last the snow came! White and thick and soft and blessed, and Guttergarten and its misery lay buried beneath us.

Then, men who had never worked before turned out to the campaign, and shouldered

shovel and broom, and that morning in many a Gutter-home the Gutter-babies were promised bread before night.

With the coming of the snow we were all able once more to look out upon Gutter-life with brave hearts.

It was Special Johnny who recovered his spirits first. Flushed with triumph and the excitement of victory, he danced in, bringing with him, on his boots and in the train of his long broom, nearly half the snow which he had been struggling to remove from our front doorstep, and squatted down in the kindly smile of the fire, stretching out little red fingers into the glow.

"Are we down'arted, girls?" he asked cheerfully; and I scorned the suggestion in the correct way — "No, boys!"

Then he began to tell me that the Boy in the Wood had a matinée to-day, and Blanchie wanted us to go, and could n't we, now the snow had come? Without, I heard the ceaseless scraping of the snow-sweepers as they bent cheerfully to their unaccustomed labour, and the shrieks of the maddened Gutter-

babies as they hurled their furious missiles in the battle of ice. In the playground of the Gutter Castle a huge white figure rose threateningly among the little wild people, like a mighty Spirit of the Snow, mocking at the puny little creatures of grime and dust who had fashioned him with their tiny ambitious hands.

Guttergarten was all fun and frolic and wild ecstatic life to-day, and I yielded.

Out into a white world of snowdrifts we went. In the West, carriage wheels slipped on the frozen ground, and the doctors were shaking their heads over old ladies with bronchitis. But in Guttergarten we knew that the Gutter Parson, as he fed the starved robins at his window-ledge, looked out across the transformed acres of his little kingdom and blessed the snow of Heaven.

It was a long journey that we made in quest of the Boy in the Wood. But at last we stood hesitatingly outside a vulgar little hall, in a squalid street.

"Shall us go on?" asked Johnny, suddenly stricken with alarm.

But a woman with a painted face and yellow hair stuck her head out upon us suddenly, and asked our business.

We told her we were Blanchie's friends and had come to see her greatest success. The woman eyed us suspiciously and went away to fetch the manager.

In another moment we were in the tremendous presence of Mr. Jacobwitz, to whom Blanchie owed the brilliant programme of her dramatic career.

"You've come to see the leetle lady?" he asked agreeably. "Well, she is most clever leetle lady, and most well worth the honour of your visit!"

He rubbed his jewelled hands together, and smiled upon us so graciously, and bent his well-oiled, perfumed head so gallantly before us, that it seemed but a little thing to pay ten bob for the diminutive velvet-cushioned and unswept little box in which he finally left us to ourselves.

But Johnny did not like him very well.

"Ain't 'e an ugly devil? I'd like to plant my number seven boot in the middle of 'im!"

I was relieved when he left us, and Johnny's threat became impracticable.

For what seemed in the delusion of Time like the Eternal Hour, Johnny and I waited patiently before that dreary curtain, until we knew by heart every line and distortion of its painted horrors. Upon our sickened brains was nailed for ever the frightful grossness of that Venus as she paddled idly up a limpid stream, where the lilies grew wastefully like weeds, and deformed Amorini bathed beside her. From time to time the "ugly devil" returned, to cheer us awhile with his disgusting attentions.

"Matinées are n't much go 'ere!" he told us; "we can't get the people till the night 'ouse and then we're full!" He spread his jewelled hands tenderly over the imaginary night house, as we looked round at the forlorn benches where scarcely a dozen people had straggled in.

But at last, at what seemed to be the other end of time altogether, the curtain rose upon the Boy in the Wood. The scene appeared to be the village school, where there must

have been a breaking-up concert, for each of the pupils was made to go through the exceedingly painful exercise of a vocal solo. Most of them, quite deservedly, got thoroughly birched afterwards, which drew peals of applause from Johnny.

It was the Babes' turn.

With a quaint little pompous gesture and a glance of boundless affection at our box, Blanchie took the front of the stage, with a very fat and simpering little girl clinging to her hand. The duet began and we heard Blanchie's voice, the shrill sweet tones of the Gutter-baby we knew, singing nonsense to empty benches, when she ought to have been out in the courtyard of the Gutter Castle, dancing round the Man of Snow.

I do not know if the Nursling was really a genius, but the little lady of the vulgar music hall played for us that afternoon in an empty house beside a stolid simpering little companion, and to the music of an untuned piano, the immortal history of the lost children with a mystical sympathy and tenderness which could not have been matched.

We saw in that afternoon the waste of Guttergarten.

The Art Nursling sang to an empty house, and Johnny was labelled "Special." Every day into the tangle of circumstance lost children hurried away from their expectations, and their supreme discovery was the falling leaf, which in its curious symbolism has always been so persistently opportune in the Psychic Venture. It was in a state of quite absurd emotion that I retired to the dressing-room and found Blanchie sitting opposite to a large Teddy Bear eating pease pudding out of a newspaper.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Jest of Guttergarten

IT is not possible for anyone without a sense of humour to stay very long in Guttergarten. Of course such defective persons do stumble frequently into the heart of the Gutter-dwellers, and provoke the sufferings of martyrdom in their frenzied endeavours to escape unobserved. But there is no abiding-place for them in the beloved country, and they are soon condemned to a perpetual exile.

Here, in the famine-stricken, horror-haunted atmosphere of the little wild people's home was born sometime the peevish genius of Laughter, and has incarnated itself in the sad-eyed echo of a Gutter-baby's smile. But there are a great many people who cannot endure the exquisite pathos of the Gutter Jest, and fly in terror from the stinging sweetness of Special Johnny's humour.

Into our midst, one distractingly busy sea-

son, came an eager young enthusiast, brimming with immaturity and zeal and the self-importance of the recent discovery of his own mind.

It was an unusually hard winter. The Gutter-babies were being swept from us in numbers by the miscroscopic demons of measles and "scarlet." The out-of-work problem grinned defiance at our feeble efforts to grapple with its gigantic proportions. All round us the little homes of Guttergarten were collapsing and the broken hearts of Guttergarten, twisted in hysterics, shrieked to us in bitter jest and laughing tears.

One or two of our workers had broken down under the strain and thrown aside the threads of their individual enterprise and energy for us to gather up. The Gutter Parson was lying on his back in the Fever Hospital under a visitation of "Dith," from which after months of anxiety, he came back to us, only that we might have the exquisite torture of watching him die.

I mention these things in the hope that they may perhaps offer some slight apology

for the callous indifference with which we sent this raw adventurer to his doom.

With tender courtesy Guttergarten sent its own message of warning to us, but we were too busy to heed.

"Some of them new 'ands of yours are very young, ain't they?" Mrs. Kirby suggested delicately, after a visit from the "Boy."

"'Ullow, Mister!" squealed the little cynic of Guttergarten, "where's yer beard?"

But we were all absorbed in the Gutter-Vision.

And we had not the least idea that the Jester had entered into argument with us.

"Shall we send someone else to collect your 'Provident'?" we suggested to Mrs. Kirby.

"Ho, no! by no means, certainly not! Young people 'as to be learned, in course. Any'ow, 'is years is a thing 'e ain't quite responsible for, and a thing as 'e'll grow out of, too. But whatever is the young feller's mother about, that she don't put 'e into somethink, 'stead of wasting 'is time a-'angin' round 'ere with nothink to do? I reckon *she* did ought to be spoke to."

It was an unusually hard winter

The Jest of Guttergarten

In the Club Room on Saturday night Dicky tugged ferociously at his pipe and confided to my careless ear, "If that kid comes a-saucin' me about 'is thrift notions, and 'is bloomin' edecation bobbery, I don't mind tellin' you, Miss, I'll sort 'im!"

A few splendid failures, and perhaps a black eye or so, would of course have very soon settled the balance of the Boy's reputation, only unfortunately that observant semi-tragic imp of Gutter-humour had discovered, while we were dreaming, that an entire absence of this sixth sense had fatally arrested the development of the young enthusiast, and made it impossible for him ever to be one of us in the dreadful jest of Guttergarten.

This fact was suddenly forced upon us with overwhelming vehemence by the Boy himself.

It was one wet sloppy miserable evening, just before Christmas, that two or three of us, driven in by the rain, assembled at the Boy's diggings and found him in despair.

No one ever dares tamper with despair in Guttergarten. That is a luxury that can only be indulged in within the limits of respecta-

bility and convention. Despair, set in the throne of Guttergarten, would run mad, indeed. If we could once forget to play in the heart of horror, or lose for one instant the heroic humour of Puck in this home of devils, the situation would be hopeless. Bleeding hearts would be trampled in the dust and the corpses of the Gutter-lovers would swing from every lamp-light in Guttergarten.

There is safety only in foolishness, and laughter is the only music to which the Gutter-dwellers will dance for us. We must laugh always, lest we should desert the awful reality of the jest.

The young doctor laughs cheerfully, while he ministers to some wretched woman in her agony; and when the bed breaks suddenly down under her, laughs still while he supports it on his knee, and continues his work without interruption.

On Saturday night when the mother of a Gutter-home is waiting, all ready dressed for the weekly shopping, until Daddy chooses to turn in with the money, the little Gutter-baby, sent up the road to meet him, splits his

sides with the tremendous humour of the jest, as he guides his bewildered parent on his homeward way, bland and gentle, but with unsteady gait and empty pockets.

"There's Mummy waitin' this 'alf-'our for the shoppin' and 'e 's bin and busted every bloomin' farthin'. Look at 'is pockets!" cries the delighted Johnny, with a happy grin on his face and in his heart a haunting fear of to-morrow's famine.

And this was the whole failure of the Boy, that he could not laugh. It was his only sin, but it banished him from the garden of the Gutter. He was sitting in an attitude of the profoundest melancholy, with his head buried in his helpless hands, because he had found a family living on twelve shillings a week!

It was the woman who earned it, and three of the children belonged to her; the man and another child did not, but she could not give them up because, although she had paid the rent for a whole year all by herself, the furniture was still his.

"I cannot see that it's funny!" moaned the Boy.

It was the eldest daughter of the family, a tired, worried person of eight years old, who had really stirred his emotions. She had come in during his visit with a heavy brother in her arms, and the little sister and the tiresome foster brother clinging to her skirts.

"Ef yer reely wanted to 'elp us, Mister, yer might tike that born byby away. Mother did n't ought to 'ave bought it when us is so dreadful poor!"

"'Old yer tongue, yer bad gal!" scolded the woman on the bed. "Yer must please 'scuse 'er, Sir. 'Er ain't no understandin' of sich things."

"Did n't yer tell me it costed twenty shillin'?" went on the unabashed little philosopher. "It'd be a sight better to 'ave bought us all boots. Could n't yer tike it 'ome to pass the evenin's like, Mister?"

We were all anxious to lift the crushing weight of Guttergarten and its wrongs and woes from the Boy's slender shoulders, but nothing could have made him smile just then.

While we lingered, a loud knock at the door

summoned him away and we heard him discussing the question of dinners with a little girl of his acquaintance.

"Please, Sir, ain't yer got no tickets ter give away?"

"Have n't you had any dinner to-day, you poor little dear?"

The sharp senses of the Gutter-baby detected the latent sympathy in those kindly tones and at once resolved that it was worth while to improve the occasion and "lay it on thick." But after all, the naked truth was quite enough.

"Gawd, no, Sir! Us don't 'ave dinner of a Saturday; we waits for our bellyful of a Sunday!"

"But if I gave you a dinner on Saturday, you would have none on Monday!" said the Boy's hopeless voice.

"Oh, yus, us would, sir; us 'aves a little bit left of a Monday. 'Course, us don't spex dinner all the rest of the week. 'T ain't likely, with my Daddy's money!"

We guessed that at this point a shilling changed hands on the doorstep.

"If you come to me on Tuesday, I'll see that you have a dinner," promised the young philanthropist, with his curly head still sympathetically thrust round the closing door.

"Not me, thanks, Mister!" shouted the Gutter-baby from the street. "None of them dirty soup-kitchen dinners fer me! My fish was all cold this mornin'! Me and my pal, us pitched it all under the table!"

"I think they might serve the poor little beggars better, don't you?" remarked the Boy sadly, as he joined us. "I shall have to look into the matter. I'm sure cold fish must be most indigestible for their little stomachs!" And he sat down with a tired sigh to his own cold tea.

Of course by this time we had all discovered the Boy's failing, and could have easily foretold the end. But as it happened, he lingered on amongst us for a little time. But he never learnt to laugh, even when the Gutter did its worst upon his sympathetic temperament.

It was Dicky at last who settled him, as he had always said he would.

Dicky, as we all knew, loved his glass on

Saturday night. Nobody else would have thought of listening to Dicky, when tumbling home upon one occasion he encountered the Boy, and at once began a long incoherent and proportionately pitiful story of his own poverty-stricken and deserving state.

The Boy emptied his pockets at once, and went home glowing with that satisfaction of the indiscriminate benefactor which is a far more blessed state than any of the Gutter-lovers can hope to enjoy. But later on there came to him some vague appreciation of Dicky's deceptive statements and he hastened forth to make himself acquainted with the real situation.

Dicky had lied bravely and was entirely unable to account for his extraordinary statements. He seemed also to be a good deal more the worse for drink.

"I'm ver' much afraid, me lad, as 'ow you've bin 'ad!" he said, with an heroic effort at speech.

But the Boy, who had never learnt to laugh, was furious. In his brief and narrow experi-

ence the Jest had never hit him so hardly before. For some time he had been drawing very near to the limit of Guttergarten. With his usual lack of humour he had persistently starved and tortured himself with his generosity until the Gutter-dwellers had relieved him of almost the bare means of existence. He was quite unfit to remain calm under the insolent buffoonery of this Gutter-trick. He did not stop for the sympathy or caution of any of his veteran friends, but hurried straight into that deadliest pitfall of Guttergarten, the Police Court, and with childish pride and insane satisfaction he got out a summons against Dicky.

Dicky's defence was that "the bloody gentleman oughter 'ave known 'e was boozed!"

But the incident closed the career of the Boy. We parted from him with real sorrow; for he had grown dear to some of us, and young things seldom pass through Guttergarten. Yet, as we waved our hands to his retreating figure across the Borderland of the beloved country, it was with a sigh of conscious relief that we saw him go. And we

turned back into the beckoning heart of our prison home with a new stern sense of the responsibility which rests upon those who are still permitted to take their part in the great and terrible Jest.

CHAPTER XXXII

Sick Gutter-Babies

I DO feel mis'able creature!" said Blanchie dismally, as she dropped into a weary little bundle on the hearth-rug, while Johnny busied himself in brewing hot coffee for her.

Certainly she looked it. Two tired and unnaturally bright eyes looked out at me from a little grey and haggard face with an almost imperative appeal for human sympathy.

"Me bones ache!" she explained patiently.

It was the weighty secret which she had kept hidden away in her brave little heart through so many late nights and tedious performances.

"I ain't no spirit left inside of me to kick. I'm fair done, Miss, I am!"

"Thank Gawd I ain't made fer no dancin'!" murmured Johnny with a sigh of pious gratitude; "ain't it a life, though!"

"Could n't you get a holiday, kid?" I

asked, with only a very faint suggestion of hopefulness.

"Gawd, no, Miss! We owes a quarter's rent now and Alf's Sunday boots in pawn and all. There ain't no peace for such as me, not in this world."

"Well, come up to the Dispensary, then, and get a tonic. We can go up into the Children's Ward afterwards and say good-night to Ivy!"

Ivy was the elder Lizzie's seventh daughter, a dear person, who had been one of our frequent visitors until a sudden deadly illness had prostrated her in a little white bed in the Dispensary Ward.

"I never thought such a thing could 'ave 'appened, not to our Ivy," the elder Lizzie had whined; "'er's always been such a rare one to enjoy 'erself, and now she won't never run again. Ain't it crool for a pore mother to think of? Where's the good Gawd to let such things be to a pore little innercent lamb!"

I cannot say that the sudden collapse of Gutter-baby Ivy ever seemed a thing to cause

astonishment to those who knew the history of her brief Gutter-career.

During her extreme youth Lizzie had had a trick of leaving her tied securely into the perambulator while she went off to her day's work in the wash-house.

No day is very long to a Gutter-baby of only a few months' experience. There are so many things to learn about and consider, and everything in this new and exciting world is worthy of the gravest attention. No wonder that a baby has to wake up so very early each morning, while his parents are still sleeping through the precious hours of the dawning day.

It is all very well for them to waste so much time, but Baby is a tremendously busy person himself. There are so many strange new problems to be puzzled out, so many wonderful powers to be developed in his own amazingly interesting little body.

One day, when he was least expecting anything of the sort, he suddenly discovered the tremendous fact that the fat little fist which had always puzzled him was good to eat.

Perhaps this very day, that was dawning so beautifully while his sluggard family slept on heedlessly, held some new discovery for him; the sudden use of his shaky little legs or the first inarticulate gymnastics of speech.

And so it was that, while the elder Lizzie patiently pursued her occupations, the seventh baby, tied up in the perambulator on the doorsteps of the Gutter Castle, watched with eager eyes the progress of the busy world above the rim of its narrow prison.

It saw the wide sweep of the Gutter-sky, as changeful and uncertain as the Gutter-life below it; grey sometimes, and peopled with shadowy forms, chasing each other like cloud-babies through the air; and often blue and dazzling, so that no Gutter-baby could look at it; but it was warm to lie with blinded eyes in such a smile. On those days one forgot to cry for the elder Lizzie's caresses. Now and then, when the day was much longer than usual, and a Gutter-baby's hungry weeping grew weaker and weaker as the shadows hemmed in its narrow world. small bright fires shot up in the black sky, an immense

discovery never to be forgotten through the whole of a Gutter-baby's surprising experience.

The seventh baby saw, too, the window of our little home, and learnt in the course of time to watch for the sight of one human face there, which often smiled down upon it, until, as the months flew by and new powers came to the little prisoner, it learnt one day to wave back a tiny hand of encouragement.

One day the elder Lizzie was sent for in a great hurry.

"'Ere, Mrs. Thingummy, you come along quick! your baby's strangled 'isself to death! You'll ketch it, — not 'arf!"

The seventh baby had at last decided that the narrow circumference of a perambulator was an absurdly limited environment for its natural development, and in its effort to toss itself into a wider sphere of action in the great world beyond, it had got into serious difficulty among the strings with which the elder Lizzie had so securely bound the little body in captivity.

From the window opposite the friendly

human face with its familiar expression of sympathy had witnessed the catastrophe. But at that precise moment Topsy had appeared in the entrance of the Gutter Castle on her way back to the factory. She seemed to be the chosen understudy of the Gutter-baby's angel, to effect her preservation in this crisis of extreme peril, and the face behind the window looked on with expectant relief. But in the mind of Topsy arose a hideous and rapid conflict. This was the opportunity of the little woman grinding at the mill, whom the shock of circumstance had so cruelly deprived of an adored brother and a faithless pal. It was clear that the elder Lizzie's seventh baby was in a position that would soon bring great scandal upon the home of the Lizzies. Doubtless the deeply respected family of Topsy would hesitate to receive the daughter of a child murderer in their midst. To the bitter and defrauded heart of lonely woman, such a complete and effectual revenge must have been a subtle temptation. For an instant the face behind the window wore an expression of the most intense

anxiety. For it literally seemed as if the fate of the Gutter-baby Ivy was swinging in the balance. But quite suddenly the helpless appeal of that tiny pitiful bundle of life, with its dying eyes turned upwards in the last agony, and its wee face discoloured with frenzied contortions, smote the maternal heart of Topsy's budding womanhood, and I knew that the elder Lizzie's seventh baby would be spared to her, in spite of gross neglect and careless cruelty.

Glancing up at my window, with sudden self-consciousness, I perceived that Topsy became aware with evident pleasure that her deed would not be without a witness. The forlorn and weary little woman, who had till now been so insignificant an individual among the tired overworked ones of the earth, had greatness at this moment thrust upon her. Henceforth she should be counted as one of the heroes of the Gutter, for she was to effect that tremendous thing over which all the perplexed wisdom of the age has been so busy and so conspicuously unsuccessful — the prolonging of a Gutter-baby's life. In a short

time the elder Lizzie arrived on the scene. She would have come sooner and in a more helpful condition, had she not been drawn into the "Blue Star" on the way by a sympathetic friend, who advised a little "pick-me-up" to steady her nerves for the approaching tragedy of the seventh baby's inquest.

"Wot they been doin' to mother's lamb?" she demanded unsteadily, gathering an exhausted infant to her thin bosom. "Ain't it 'ard that yer Daddy can't mind yer while I 'as to leave the 'ome?"

Still muttering her mingled soothings and curses, she stumbled up the stairs of the Gutter Castle and rudely disturbed the peaceful slumbers of the seventh baby's father.

"Yer bleedin' murderer!" she addressed him; "yer 'ave done for our Ivy, with yer drunken ways! 'Ere's 'er pore corpse cold in me arms. Take it from me broken mother's 'art!"

As she reeled before the man's dizzy gaze, suddenly the little body of Gutter-baby Ivy sped through the air in his direction. It was not his fault that he failed to catch it, in its

rapid and unexpected flight. He was but half-awake after all. Halfway between them the corpse of the seventh baby fell with a hideous thud upon the floor and immediately began to wail loudly.

This episode in the early history of Gutter-baby Ivy had of course passed entirely into oblivion. But now, five years later, a small eager-eyed and persistently chattering little creature lay on her back in the bed called "Mary Martineau" in the Children's Dispensary. So Blanchie and Special Johnny and I would go and say good-night to her when we had finished our business in the doctor's consulting den below.

The waiting-room was overflowing with human life and the battle of many microbes. There were measly Gutter-babies there and Gutter-babies with toothache and sore throats and every other form of suffering which the flesh of a Gutter-baby is heir to. One very young Gutter-baby in its mother's arms had excited the sympathetic attention of every patient in those long lines of unsightly suffering humanity, as they gazed critically on each

other's symptoms and discoursed in detail upon their own.

"Ain't 'e a pore little starveling! Just skin and bone 'e is! Thank Gawd, I never starved none o' mine to death, though no one 's 'ad a worser struggle with a 'ome nor me!"

"My, ain't that a sight to shame a woman! Lord love us, wot a pore little crittur!"

Many such bitter criticisms, accompanied by scathing glances of shocked interest, the mother of the starveling had to endure while she waited anxiously for the little door at the end of the room to open and admit her to the heavy atmosphere of the consulting-den where the doctor worked his magic charms.

"Yer don't none of you know as 'ow I'm placed, else yer would n't talk so!" declared the poor mother piteously. "Gawd in 'eaven knows as 'ow I've done the best I could for this 'ere pore little sufferer ever since 'e was born. Why, 'e 'as the same as we do, but so sure as 'e 'as it, so 'e ups it. And I've tried every food in Gawd's creation, and to show as 'ow I speaks the truth — and Gawd in 'eaven knows I'd never tell a lie with me baby

dyin' by inches on me breast — I've brought all the tins in this 'ere bag to prove it!"

At this point Blanchie returned with a huge bottle of cod-liver oil, and we left the stormy scene of the waiting-room for the peaceful and pathetic atmosphere of the Children's Ward.

"We're all in a muddle, Miss!" the cheerful Nurse greeted us; "it's just bed-time, and the babies are being put to bed."

A piercing yell from behind a screen at the far end of the Ward reached us. It was Baby Billy having his bath.

In the middle of a row of little white cots, each containing its own Gutter-baby with a bright warm red jacket and a clean and smiling face, sat Ivy, serene and radiant, ready to receive her guests with perfect dignity and composure.

"'Ullo!" said Johnny.

"Wot cheer!" answered Ivy.

"Do you like bein' 'ere?" asked the Art Nursling kindly.

"Not 'arf I don't!" said Gutter-baby Ivy. "It's warm in 'ere, 't ain't always warm outside!"

"Is that why yer likes it, then?" suggested Special Johnny.

"Naow," said the seventh baby firmly; "wotcher think? We 'as dinner in 'ere every day!" She let the tremendous fact soak into our minds gradually, and then startled us with a yet more astonishing statement, "We 'as supper, too; I'm just waitin' fer my supper this very minnit!"

"What time do you have supper, Ivy?"

"Seven," announced the small epicure with a smile of gluttonous anticipation in her wide blue eyes.

"Well, it's only half-past five now," we assured her.

"Oh, yes," said Ivy; "a hour or so passes soon when you've got somethin' to look forward to!"

"I'll tell you a story!" began the Art Nursling; "it'll hearten yer up a bit! Now, where are yer toes got to. This little pig —"

"Oh, no, 'e never now, I used to believe that when I was your age!" interrupted the sick Gutter-baby firmly.

All round us the little invalids were being

tidied up for the night; busy nurses were hurrying from one bedside to another and Baby Billy had emerged from behind the screen and was recovering his temper over a bottle. It seemed as if our visit must soon draw to a close.

"Perhaps we had better say good-night now!" I suggested.

"No, no, yer can't go!" squeaked the seventh baby, and a sudden change came over the merry independence of her little face. I had often seen that change before. I watched it creep about those pouting baby lips now, and shadow the laughing sweetness of a Gutter-baby's eyes. I saw the pinched features of sickness twisted into a pain that was sadder than the grey warning of death. This new enemy, in whose grip we must leave the seventh baby to struggle, was the nostalgia of Guttergarten.

"It ain't that I'm not 'appy 'ere!" we heard Ivy sobbing in the arms of a sympathetic nurse; "it's 'eaven to me, this place is, so warm and all, and a dinner every dy, but, oh, 'ow I does want to run the streets ag'in!"

"I s'pose," said the solemn Art Nursling, "if I were in there all warm and sleepy, I'd want to get up and work again!"

"We're all cryin' fer somethin' as we don't get!" observed Special Johnny wisely.

As we turned out of the Dispensary into Guttergarten, the voices of the children straining at the top notes of their evening hymn reached our ears.

"Dily, dily, sing the praises, of the city Gawd 'ave mide!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Twilight of Johnny

ONE had known all along that there must be the End. In a way it had been always present — as one scents the damp still twilight in the hot flush of a summer daybreak. Once, behind a screen carefully pasted all over with cast-away Christmas Cards, in a long cool room where rows of solemn snowy beds stared sternly at each other, one had watched a little frowning face toss restlessly among the pillows, and thought the End might be coming in that way, and had held the small dry feverish hand and stroked the hot aching little head, with a dreadful pang lest each touch might be the last. But when each nurse in the ward had in turn, and not without sufficient reason, cursed her profession, Johnny crawled back again, a little more exacting and uncertain, to look out at Gutter-life once more with eyes a little bigger and brighter than ever —

and the fear of the End was swallowed up in sunshine, only to threaten us again and lower menacingly over our heads for one miserable week.

The over-crowding of Johnny's one-roomed home was becoming every year a more tremendous problem, and the natural dispositions of Johnny did not help him to adapt himself to it. He was for ever waking the baby — punching his little brothers and tearing his little sisters' pinafores. He played truant consistently in spite of the daily resolution which he made when parting with me, "'E'll start termorrer, and go ter schule reg'lar now!" He could never be found when wanted, except at dinner-time, and had no conception whatever of a parental authority that limited his freedom of action. His mother was worn out with constantly being dragged away from her many cares to hear the latest harassing recital of her Johnny's devilry.

In vain I tried to defend the caprice of undeveloped genius. The long-suffering neighbourhood which he had plagued beyond

endurance, hammering on frenzied knockers, throwing stones till there was not a square inch of glass left for miles round, frightening shy horses and catapulting the costers' donkeys, voiced its indignation in the universal cry, "Johnny must be put away!"

And so the End seemed very near. We sat through a long dull afternoon of suspense, looking into each other's eyes with a sorrowful pity, while the Committee discussed and wrangled over the awful question.

"Will yer cum an' see yer little Johnny?" he enquired beseechingly, in an anxious whisper, when things seemed going against us. "Will I be yer little Johnny still, wotever 'appens?"

Our only comfort during this dreadful day was the firm conviction, deeply grounded in the mind of each of us, that no Institution under the wide sky would hold the restless little body of my Johnny against its own inclination.

"Cheer up, I'll foind yer ag'in some'ow!" he nodded wisely, and I knew him too well not to believe it.

But just as the Committee discovered a thirst at the suggestion of a clink of teacups, and the Chairman began to feel pressed for time, Johnny's governess appeared, on this one occasion, at least, as his champion. Neither of us remembers quite what occurred. The atmosphere was a little convulsed. It was the kind of case that gets hold of a Committee like an epidemic. They had all the particulars so readily to hand and the money was pouring in; they had a letter of admission for a suitable home, too, and it was such a pity to waste it; and they were so sure of what they were doing — which was satisfactory, if unusual! They were going to teach a poor mother not to feel responsible for the child she had brought into being by her own act. They were going to give a little Gutter-baby just enough to eat, and just enough to wear, and the right to a wonderful bed in the corner of a clean room, where he would weep himself to sleep often, and wake up feeling about in the darkness with cold lonely hands for the warm bodies of the little brothers he had lost. And they were going to

smile as if they had done a very clever thing, when one day the little wild spirit bruised itself into sullen submission against the gilded bars of their Charity. But the verdict of Johnny's teacher was important, and it happened to be particularly clear and decided and allowed no compromise. She said a great deal about the arrest of development, and effect of unwise discipline on a sensitive mind, and she alluded with hopefulness to the affectionate disposition of my Johnny. She admitted that he was difficult, and that his ruling passion was greed — but they were greedy who would have robbed me of my one little Gutter-lamb. Then she sat down very hot, and longing heartily, no doubt, for her familiar school-room with its eccentric and beloved little company.

But the case of Special Johnny was dismissed.

He showed his relief in the way most natural to him.

He "pinched" the little girls' dinner tickets, and used them for his own needs, and knocked any resentment on the head at once.

He raced the streets madly whooping and yelling in an exuberance of spirits until he seemed to be clinging to every vehicle that rattled by. He developed an awful terror of the law and fled whenever a policeman appeared. He tormented and bullied me till I began to feel a little less active animosity towards the Committee that had so nearly settled his fate.

But the End did come upon us at last, and I remembered only that I had lost my Johnny. He came in one morning with very few clothes on, in rather an excited condition and flung himself on the floor.

"Blest ef I ain't bin er pawnin' twenty 'undred tonnes terdy!" he explained, and bounced on a chair, like a little shabby ball that has weathered many puddles. "The landlord sez ter mother, sez 'e, 'if 'er don't py ternight,' sez 'e, 'out 'er goes.' We can't go fer, I sez, I should n't loike ter lose yer!"

I did not feel inclined to consider the matter very seriously; the Gutter-folk generally get money if they really need it. In fact, after a time one comes to know that it is only for

reasons of economy that they have none; and the cares of a busy day soon rushed in to crowd out any remembrance of Johnny's suggestion.

But I woke in the night with a queer sense of something wrong. It was too still for an alarm of fire, there were no voices, no red glow and no crowd. A dog barked once in the silence below. Very soon the birds would be singing to the dawn, and I slipped back into a half-waking dream. The empty street, as it twisted round to the left past the "Blue Star," held a group of stealthy figures, sliding away into the distance; and it seemed to me that one lingered there and looked back at me as it merged into the shadows. I am thankful for that memory at least.

The End must have happened anyhow. In the childhood of the ages a garden or a Gutter is big enough for humanity. But the world survived the garden, as the mind of Special Johnny must soon have outgrown the small environment of our correspondence. It is blessed to have a friend to miss in his absence, but it is a thing past endurance to learn to miss him when he is with you. So

A group of stealthy figures sliding away

the end was merciful, and I may still listen through the years for the sound of his little two-wheeled chariot, stacked with the fruits of Covent Garden, as he drives furiously over the cobbles, a clumsy gruff-voiced Jehu with a patient tired broken-kneed donkey, slipping and straining and tumbling under him, while Gutter-babies fly to their mothers with their hearts in their mouths.

I was not quite sure next morning what had occurred, and mistrusted, as one always does with the daybreak, any kind of premonition. Hurrying up the strangely friendless street, I entered the house where Johnny had passed four years of his young lifetime. A cat was expectorating on the threshold. I brushed past and climbed the creaking stairway. One glance at the room revealed its cruel secret. The little home was there, but the family had gone.

His pet bird, a twittering, restive linnet, was hopping searchingly from perch to perch in a small square cage pinned to the wall. There was no one to offer it breakfast this morning, but its eye was hopeful yet.

It was the one little commonplace detail that has its part in every tragedy, and makes it just too hard to bear. I picked out the tiny stick that fastened its prison. The bird flew straight out of the broken window across the forest of grey chimneys into the blue sky, and its little cage hung against the wall, empty as a human heart.

THE END

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